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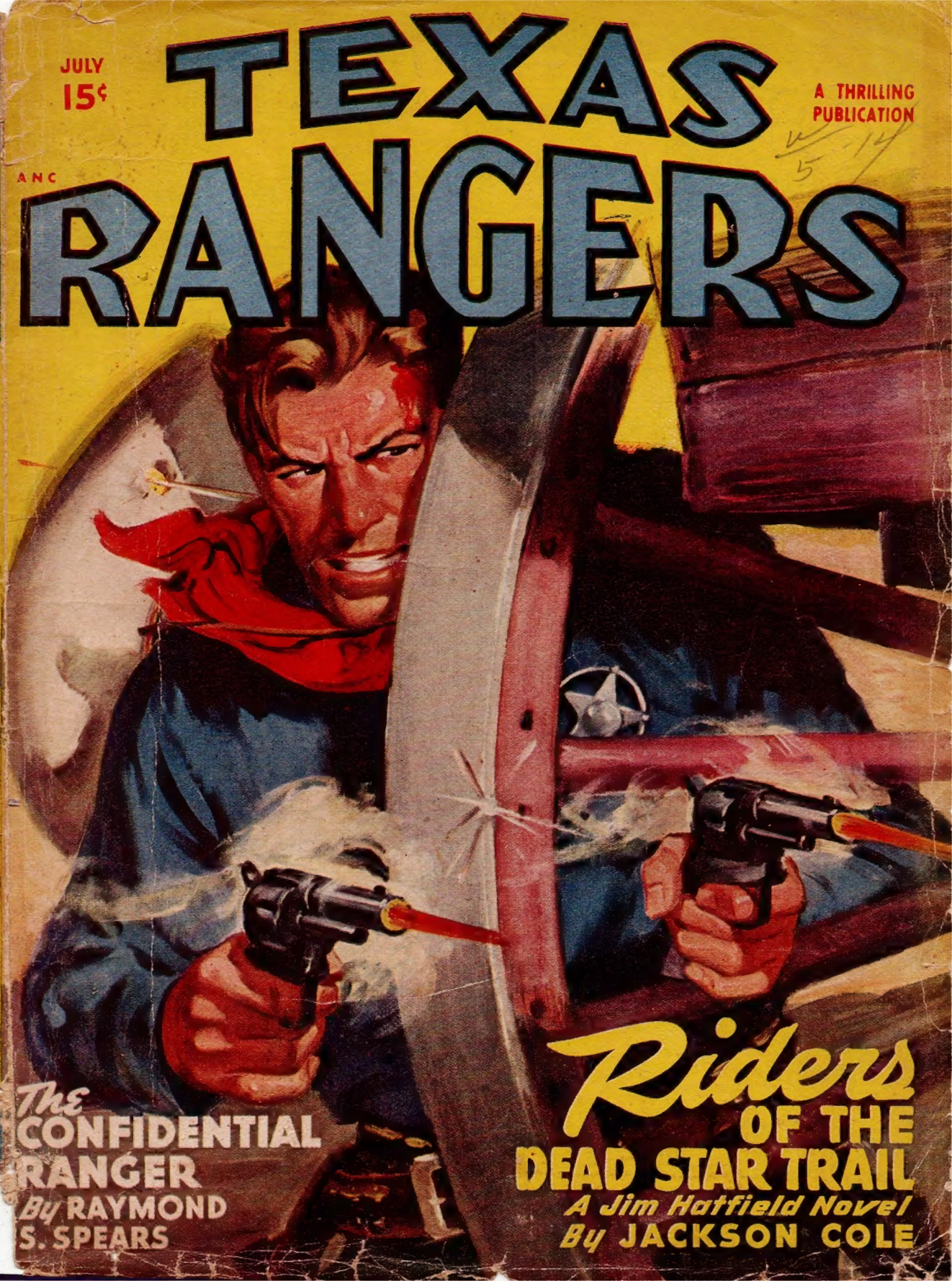

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VOLUME 31, NUMBER 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JULY, 1948

COMPLETE NOVEL

Riders of the Dead Star Trail

By Jackson Cole

Stolen cattle herds and a secret gold mine in the Perdida Mountain Country start the Lone Wolf on a peril-packed manhunt! Jim Hatfield uses geology and swift gun logic as his weapons in a range war! 9

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A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters

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The FRONTIER POST

by CAPTAIN STARR

HIYA, gals and galluses! Are you one of those gifted folks who never forgets a name or face? If so, then I reckon you're not interested in the museum of real-life Western characters shown in the funny-looking drawings.

But if you do have trouble remembering people you meet, here's a valuable memory secret, simply explained. It's a surefire method for making friends.

Facts About Folks

The idea, it isn't mine. I borrowed these sketches from the notebook of Cass Moore, who used to be a traveling hide buyer. He met heaps of folks and found that it boosted business to keep in mind, not only their names and what they looked like, but handy little facts that helped him to know them better.

Shown in these thumbnail sketches are twenty men of different occupations, habits and appearances. Cass, he had their names and addresses written under each. These I've left out, to avoid embarrassing anybody.

The twenty characters in our free museum are right easy to pick out and identify with a few explanatory words. Here they are, folks, and after you've looked 'em over, you'll sort of feel as though you know 'em.

First—the Fish Liar

In the upper-left corner is the Fish Liar. Cass says it's his likeness, too. He soon learned how to interest this hombre, just by saving up a few choice fish yarns and spinning them when they met up.

Upper-right shows Old Noisy, who was plumb fond of an argument. He flapped his arms around when he argufied, as the picture shows.

Under Old Noisy we have Two-Face Charley with his long, sharp nose and forked tongue. The way to get along with Charley was to tell him nothing that shouldn't be

spread around, Cass says. But feeding him a morsel of harmless gossip now and then helped them to get along.

Seems like the most rememberable thing about the fat, baldish man was that he was a baseball fan and smoked long, thin cigars. Cass pictured him from behind, to show the creases in his neck, which impressed him more than Fatty's face.

Cogwheel the Wizard

Our eye falls next on Cogwheel, the mechanical wizard. He always hankered to hear about new gadgets and to talk about his own inventions.

The donkey-eared gent who brayed songs is shown just opposite Cogwheel. The shape of his mouth shows that he sang bass.

Old Aches & Pains, the chronic complainer, required no face to be remembered. This party talked about his ailments to anybody who would listen.

It's easy to see that the pipe-smoking hombre is a house builder. The profile sketch, Cass tells me, is as good a likeness as any photo.

Past the end of Rooftop's briar is Pop Percent, the bristle-headed schemer, always asking for discounts and such.

Under Rooftop, Plugcut Pete appears, with only the lower half of his face showing, because that was his most conspicuous part—the bulgy cheek and tobacco-chawin' mouth, with the cleft chin and seamy jowls.

The Injun, with his straight hair, wide hat, sun-squint and solemn slit of a mouth is a rider, as the saddle shows. Opposite him is the hoss trader, the hawk-faced man who had money in plugs.

Meet Mr. Moneybags

Moneybags, with his baggy eyes and toothbrush mustache, is a small town rich man. Beside him you see Buck, the Bookman, who wears clamp-on specs. Bring him a book and he's yours for life, Cass claims.

Easiest of all to get along with is Grubby, the big eater. The fork is his symbol. He wears dark goggles and an openwork, toothy smile, like a cattle guard. Cass always took him out to a big feed before talking business.

The cattleman, with one calculating eye, his handlebar mustache and shrewd beak is shown under Moneybags. All business, he is.

(Continued on page 106)

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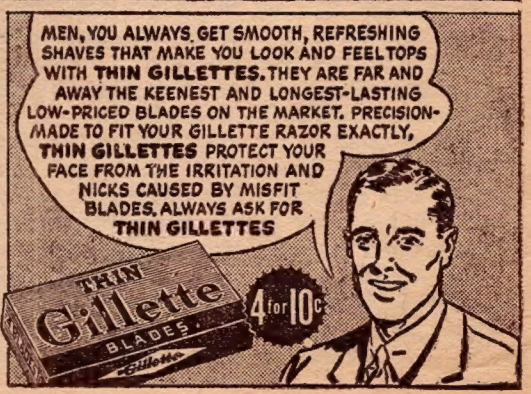
SORRY... WH-H-Y!
GET BACK!
BANG!
BANG!
WH-E-E-E-E!
BANG!
GATHERING FEATURE STORY MATERIAL IN THE GUISE OF A PANHANDLER, BUCK ALLEN, EX-GI AND THE GAZETTE'S NEWEST REPORTER, IS JUST "BRACING" A LIKELY PROSPECT WHEN...

THE WHOLE CITY OWES YOU A DEBT
I'LL TAKE PAYMENT IN A FAST RIDE TO THE GAZETTE, CAPTAIN. THIS PANHANDLER HAS A STORY TO WRITE
HMMM — HE'S ONE OF MY REPORTERS

TWO HOURS LATER

MR. WINN, OUR PUBLISHER, WANTS TO SEE YOU AT HIS HOME
NOT IN THIS RIG... I'M CLEANING UP FIRST
...The Gazette...
REPORTER DOWNS THUGS WITH CUP'S BUN!

I'M ROUGH ON PANHANDLERS, ALLEN, BUT AS FOR OUR STAR REPORTER...
FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS! PINCH ME, SOMEBODY!
A REAL HERO... AND REALLY HANDSOME!


MEN, YOU ALWAYS GET SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK AND FEEL TOPS WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY ARE FAR AND AWAY THE KEENEST AND LONGEST-LASTING LOW-PRICED BLADES ON THE MARKET. PRECISION-MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY, THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE IRRITATION AND NICKS CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
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A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY

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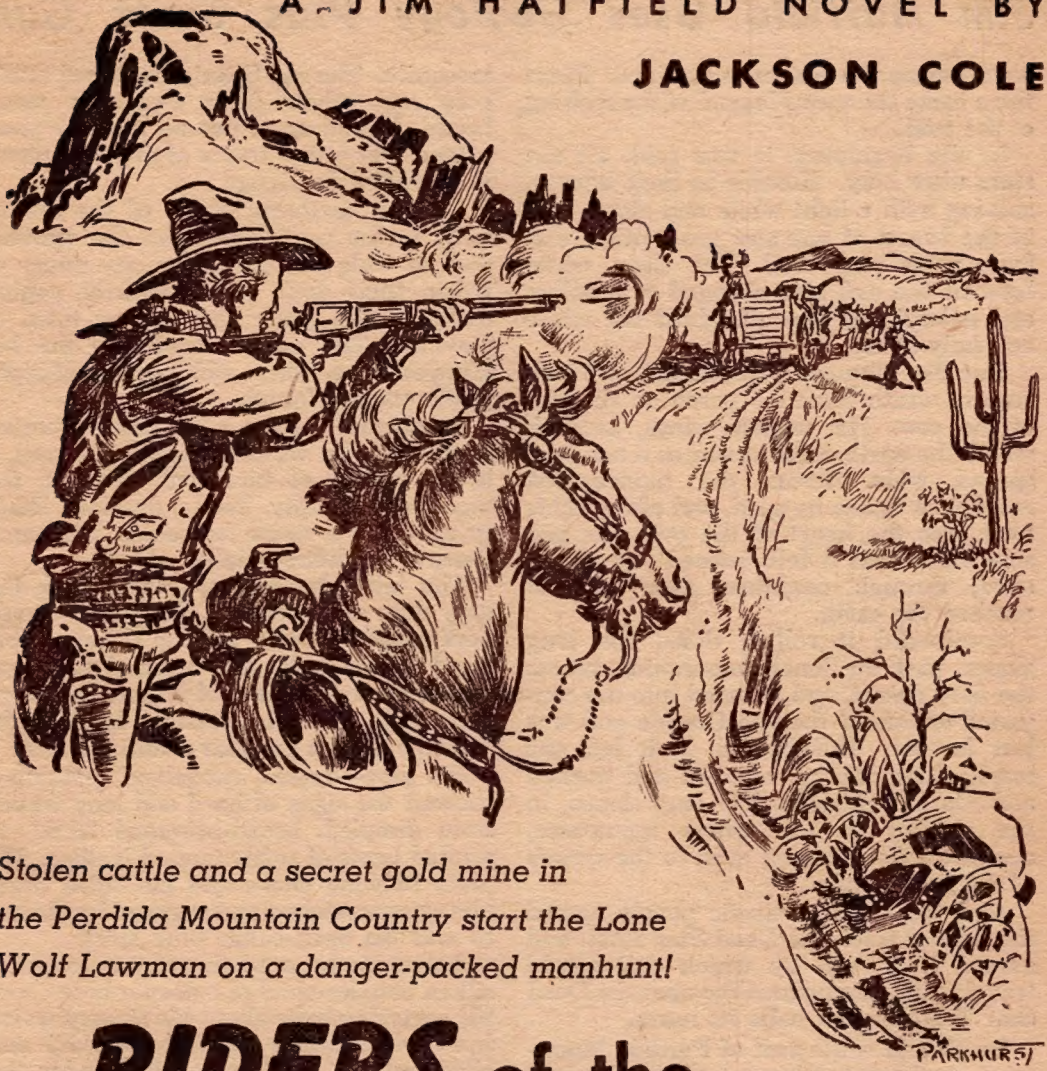

Stolen cattle and a secret gold mine in the Perdida Mountain Country start the Lone Wolf Lawman on a danger-packed manhunt!

RIDERS of the DEAD STAR TRAIL

CHAPTER I

A Cave and a Storm

LIKE a vast fortress hewed from a single block of stone, Perdida Mountain glowed in the white fire of the moon. In its mighty shadow, curving around its spreading base, ran that old and mysterious trail once trod by Coronado and the iron men of Spain, and immeasurably ancient when the Spaniard first set mailed foot on the soil of Texas.

"The Dead Star Trail", came the name from the people of the Aztec, but not of the Aztecs. Born, it was said, in the mouths of the strange and mystic folk who

were before the Aztecs in the land. From them came the weird legend of the making of the trail.

In the beginning, it was said, all the stars were holy. Humble in their beauty, shining with a light white and clear. But in the breast of one star grew pride, and from pride came evil. The clear, white light of the evil star changed to a sullen and baleful red that affrighted the white and holy stars.

But the Thunder Bird, Spirit of Good, rose in wrath from his perch on the rim of the sun. His mighty wings, beneath which the earth could cower as a nestling, spread wide. Across the unmeasured reaches of Space he sped, and plunged his beak into the heart of the evil star and slew it, so that it fell, burned and blackened, through countless ages until it reached the earth.

Southward it rolled, down the long slopes, past the lonely mountains, across the fiery desert, and plunged into the canyoned waters of the Rio Grande and was lost forever. But behind it, it left the mark of its passing, crooked and burned and blackened, down the long slopes, in the shadow of the lonely mountains, across the fiery desert, even to the waters of the Rio Grande.

And the old and mystic people named the fearful track the Dead Star Trail, and named it a road by which evil would travel. And throughout the ages the Dead Star Trail did not belie its name.

South and southwest of Perdida Mountain, southern battlement of the Perdida Range, stretches the desert, an arid waste of sand and salt and alkali. Grotesque buttes and chimney rocks start up from its burning floor, and strange, symmetrical spires that almost seem to be monuments set by the hand of man, instead of what they are—tombstones to ages long dead. Farther west are mountains, a purple shadow against the Texas sky, and farther to the south, beyond the Rio Grande, are other mountains, darkly blue, crowned with white—the mountains of Mexico.

TO the west and north of Perdida is rangeland, rich in grass and curly mesquite. The old Spaniards mined much gold and silver from Perdida's stony breast, legend says, but no modern prospector ever found traces of precious metal in the Perdida Range.

On the northern slopes of the mountains to the west, that form the western wall of wide Espejo Valley, are mines of value, their dark tunnel mouths gaping down at the cattle and mining town of Gavilan. The most valuable is the big Harqua Mine, where rich pockets of high-grade ore are found.

Southward from Perdida, veering slightly to the west, stretched the trail, a broad ribbon of tarnished silver in the moonlight. Empty, lonely, desolate. Empty save for a single horseman who rode toward Perdida's mighty slopes.

The tall rider was powdered with the gray dust of the desert. His broad shoulders sagged a little, and he slumped forward in the hull. His bronzed face was etched with deep lines of fatigue and there were dark circles beneath the long, black-lashed eyes of a peculiar shade of green.

His garb—typical rangeland costume—showed the signs of hard and long travel, from dimpled, broad-brimmed "J.B." to scuffed boots of softly tanned leather. His plain batwing chaps and his faded overalls were scratched and snagged by thorns, as was his open-collar blue shirt.

About his bronzed throat was looped a silken handkerchief of a deeper blue. Double cartridge belts about his sinewy waist, from which hung carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters sagging under the weight of heavy black guns, completed his outfit.

The magnificent golden horse the rider forked also seemed on the verge of exhaustion. His head hung low, his glorious silky mane rippling dispiritedly. He moved at a shambling walk and didn't appear to care much whether one hoof would be able to follow its fellow in the next step.

The full moon had crossed the zenith and was pouring a flood of ghostly light down the vast rampart of Perdida's western slope and silvering the edges of storm clouds that rolled slowly up from the

western horizon. On the dark breast of the cloud bank was a flicker of lightning. The air quivered to the mutter of distant thunder.

The man glanced wearily toward the ominous cloud bank.

"Goldy," he told the horse, "it looks like, along with everything else, we're in for a good wettin'."

He turned his gaze up the mountain slope and his eyes quickened with interest. Perhaps a hundred yards above the trail was a broad bench well grown with grass, stands of sotol, and bristles of thicket. In the face of the beetling cliff beyond was a dark opening. The man eyed it speculatively, and pulled the big sorrel to a halt.

"Seems to be a cave," he remarked, "and from the looks of the grass and stuff, there ought to be water. Hoss, I've a notion we could do worse than hole up there till the storm is over. You can eat yore fill, and I could stand a helpin' of chuck myself, as well as a mite of shut-eye. Still got some coffee, bacon, and a few eggs left in the saddle-bag. Suppose we take a try at it."

It was a hard scramble up the slope to the bench, but the golden horse made it without much trouble. In front of the cave his rider dismounted, broke off a dry sotol stalk and touched a match to the splintered end. The sotol burned with a clear flame, providing a satisfactory torch. The man approached the cave.

JIM HATFIELD

"Don't want to den up with a rattlesnake or two," he thought.

The floor of the cave, however, was clean and dry, and there were no signs of reptilian occupancy. A trickle of water flowed along one wall, in a shallow channel, to lose itself amid the growth outside.

"Couldn't be better," the man enthused. "And that rainstorm is comin' up fast."

With swift efficiency he got the rig off the horse. He unrolled a blanket and spread it on the cave floor. Turning the

horse loose to graze, he broke off a large quantity of sotol stalks and dead branches in the thickets. Soon he had a good fire going. In short order coffee was bubbling in a little flat bucket, bacon sizzling in a small skillet.

He unwrapped several carefully packed and padded eggs and broke them in with the bacon. A small hunk of bread was also forthcoming from the saddle-bag.

WITH appreciation he sat down to a savory meal which he consumed by the light of the fire, and to the music of the loudening thunder. Goldy, the horse, cropped contentedly outside the cave, in which he would seek shelter when the storm broke.

Goldy's rider rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand and smoked contentedly, while he gazed at the lightning forking and webbing the black sky with pale gold. Finally he pinched out his cigarette butt and tossed it away. From his pocket he drew a smeary scrap of paper upon which was an illiterate-appearing scrawl. His black brows drawing together, he read the disjointed sentences:

> Jim Hatfield stay out of perdida country you aint wanted here and you aint got a chance in a hundred to git out alive *we aint fooling*
> Quantrell

Jim Hatfield, he whom a stern old Lieutenant of Rangers named the Lone Wolf, turned the paper over in his slim fingers, turned it over again, gazed at it with a thoughtful look in his green eyes. It had come to him at Ranger Post headquarters some two weeks before, the day after Captain Bill McDowell had suggested that a little ride over to the Perdida country wouldn't be a bad notion for his lieutenant and best Ranger.

"Seems as if there's a feller operatin' over there," Captain Bill had said. "Raisin' Tophet and shovin' a chunk under a corner. Goes by the name of Quantrell, I understand. Must have took over the name from Quantrell, the ruckus raiser, of Civil War days. Of course, Bill Quantrell has been dead years and years—before you was born, Jim—but folks still remember the name."

"A way with the owlhoot brand," Hatfield had remarked. "To take the name of some big skookum he-wolf and try to live up to his reputation."

"From the reports I been gettin', this hellion is doin' a purty good chore of it," McDowell had grunted. "He's shore got that country set by the ears. Sort of a mysterious jigger nobody has ever seen for shore. Some say he's tall; others say he's short. Sometimes he's reported as wearin' big black whiskers; other folks swear he's clean shaved. Different folks who have tangled with his outfit tell different stories."

"Could be more'n one of him," Hatfield had observed.

"I've thought of that," McDowell had admitted. "Let one hellion begin buildin' up a reputation and others fall in line and make out to be him. But each chore that's been pulled over there is enough alike to sort of mark 'em for the work of one outfit. Of course, different folks may spot different members of the bunch for top worker. But I figger there is some smart and salty jigger directin' operations, all right. Well, yuh got a hard week of ridin' before yuh, Jim. *Adios,* and good luck."

And the next morning after his assignment from McDowell, Hatfield had received the warning scrawl, through the mail. He had been about to cast it contemptuously aside, when he noted a peculiarity of wording. He decided to keep it, and now he studied it intently by the light of his dying fire.

"Handwriting disguised all right," he mused. "Nobody who could write at all ever wrote that bad. And one little slip. Not much, but mebbe enough to drop a loop around some jigger's neck before the last brand's run."

He folded the paper and carefully stowed it in a cunningly contrived secret pocket in his broad leather belt. Then he arranged his blanket, made a pillow of his saddle, and, with his guns ready to hand, went to sleep to the accompaniment of rolling thunder and dashing rain.

Inside the cave mouth, Goldy also slept, with one eye open, and his ears cocked for any unusual sound that might filter through the uproar outside.

It was an unusual sound that aroused Hatfield shortly before dawn. He sat up, feeling greatly refreshed—a new man, in fact, in that clean, rain-washed mountain air—and listened to a peculiar creaking and rumbling that drifted up from the trail below.

Great back and arm muscles of the Ranger writhed and bulged, and suddenly there was a snap as a link parted
(CHAP. IX)

His fire had died to gray ashes, but the storm had passed, and reddish light streamed into the cave mouth from the great globe of the sullen moon that hung just over the western mountain crests.

Hatfield slipped to the mouth of the cave and peered out. He could see the trail clearly outlined in the lurid light. Along the trail crept a high two-wheeled cart drawn by four sturdy oxen. A figure wearing a broad, flopping hat was hunched on the driver's seat. The body of the cart was heaped high with something that gleamed in the moonlight.

"Salt cart headed for Mexico," the Lone Wolf muttered. "Been up to the salt lakes to the northeast of here and bringing back a load."

He glanced at the moon, the lower edge of which was now touching the western crags, gazed after the cart for a moment and turned back to his blankets. It still wanted almost an hour till dawn.

CHAPTER II

Night Birds

FOR better than half an hour, Hatfield dozed, luxuriating in the unwonted pleasure of total relaxation. Goldy also seemed filled with peace and taking his comfort. Suddenly, however, his sensitive ears pricked forward. He blew softly through his nose.

Hatfield opened his eyes, glanced inquiringly toward the horse, now clearly outlined in the strengthening light of dawn. He sat up as the sound that had attracted Goldy's interest reached him. A rhythmical clicking drawing quickly near—the sound of swift hoofs beating the hard surface of the trail.

He rose to his feet, stepped to the mouth of the cave, but taking care to keep well back in the shadow. He gazed toward where the trail curved around the mountain base to the north.

From around the curve bulged a troop of hard-riding horsemen, a full dozen of them. Gigantic, unreal in the elusive light, they swept past, drumming toward the desert that was now bathed in a tremulous golden glow.

Hatfield stepped forward and followed their progress with interested eyes. Far out on the desert, two miles or more distant, he could see the salt cart crawling slowly southward. He saw the driver twist about on his seat and gaze at the approaching horsemen. Abruptly he faced to the front and from the movement of his arm, Hatfield judged he was urging his shambling oxen to greater speed.

The racing horsemen swiftly closed the distance. Hatfield uttered a sharp exclamation.

A puff of whitish smoke mushroomed from the ranks of the riders. Even before he heard the crack of the distant rifle, Hatfield saw the ox cart driver throw up his arms, pitch sideward from his seat and sprawl motionless on the ground. The oxen stopped, turning their heads to look about. The horsemen charged forward with unabated speed.

Up to the cart and the motionless figure they charged, jerking their horses to a halt with such suddenness that the sliding hoofs kicked up little puffs of dust. They dismounted. One strode to the prostrate driver, looked down at him, turned away. The others swarmed over the cart. The salt misted through the air as they scooped it up with their hands and flung it from the heaped-up bed.

With lightning speed, Jim Hatfield got the rig on Goldy. He sent the big sorrel skittering down the slope. As the horse's irons rang on the hard surface, Hatfield's great voice boomed out like a golden bugle call:

"Trail, Goldy, trail!"

Instantly the great sorrel extended himself. His irons drummed the trail, his steely legs shot backward like pistons. He seemed literally to pour his long body over the ground. Mane tossing in the wind of his passing, eyes rolling, nostrils flaring red, he charged toward the group of killers busy with the salt cart.

Suddenly heads were flung up, faces turned toward the speeding horseman. A moment later, puffs of smoke spurted from the cart. Bullets sang past the golden horse and his tall rider.

Face bleak as the granite of Perdida Mountain, eyes the cold gray of a stormy winter sky, Jim Hatfield reached down and slid his heavy Winchester from the boot. He spoke to Goldy, who leveled off

to a smooth running walk. Hatfield cuddled the rifle butt against his shoulder. His eyes glanced along the sights. His hand squeezed the stock.

The rifle bucked in his grasp. The report rang out clear and metallic. One of the men on the salt cart went overboard like a hurled sack of old clothes.

Again the rifle boomed. A second man reeled sideward, his arms flopping. Hatfield could almost hear his yell of pain. A third report, and a third man down, clawing and kicking on top of the cart.

The others leaped to the ground and fled wildly toward their plunging horses that were being held by three of the group. Without an instant's hesitation they flung themselves into saddles and went racing away southward, one reeling and swaying in the hull. Behind them they left three motionless figures, instead of one.

HATFIELD sent shot after shot whining after them. He paused to stuff fresh cartridges into the magazine, speaking to Goldy. The sorrel resumed his racing gallop. Hatfield leaned forward, his eyes intent on the fugitives he was gradually overhauling. Abruptly he muttered an oath.

The edge of the sun was above the eastern horizon, but it was growing darker. Racing out of the east was a long, dark line that swirled and danced, billowing from the surface of the desert to the blue of the darkening sky.

"Sand storm!" the Lone Wolf muttered disgustedly. "Cutting right across the trail. The hellions are gettin' a fine chance!"

Even as he spoke, the fleeing horsemen vanished into the wall of dust and sand particles. A few moments later Hatfield pulled Goldy to a halt beside the motionless cart.

A single glance told him there was nothing to be done for the driver. The heavy rifle slug had torn through him from back to chest, just above the heart. Also, there was nothing more to be feared from the two raiders. One lay huddled on the ground, the other sprawled across the salt in the cart.

Hatfield glanced at the darkening sky. He desired to give the scene of the killing a careful going over, but he knew the danger in that ominous dark line that swirled across the desert a scant quarter of a mile to the south. The storm was flowing from east to west in the clearly defined path, but some wind vagary might shift it to the north and engulf him in the blinding clouds of dust and sand.

Perhaps a hundred yards to the north of the cart was a wide and tall butte. A score of feet from its spreading base the rock overhung, providing a roofed aperture between jutting walls of stone.

"A good hole-up there," the Ranger muttered. "Come on, feller," he told the sorrel. "I'll just put you in the clear and if that mess of up-ended desert heads this way I'll dive in with yuh."

He led the sorrel to the cavelike shelter and left him in its depths. Then he returned to the cart. If necessary, he could drive the vehicle into the cleft, where the oxen would also be sheltered.

Hatfield first devoted his attention to the dead owlhoots. They were ornery looking specimens, their distorted features lined by dissipation and full rein which had been given to their evil passions.

"Typical Border scum," he mused, "only some more intelligent lookin' than the average. Wonder why in blazes did they gun down that poor devil of a driver like they did? Snake-blooded hellions! Never gave him a chance."

He glanced apprehensively at the darkening sky. The sun shone a deep, weird magenta color through the pall of yellow dust that swirled and eddied above. To the south was a roaring, blasting inferno. But where the salt cart stood was an oasis of comparative calm.

The answer for this was obvious. To the east a long spur of Perdida Mountain ran far into the south. To the west, and near, was a line of tremendous buttes that towered high. Between these two natural walls was a wide amphitheatre shut off from the wind and from the blinding clouds of sand. Dust and particles swirled about the cart, but the full force of the blast was shunted away by the battlements of stone that resisted the wind.

But the great amphitheatre was filled with flying yellow shadows and the scream and moan of the wind. The particles of sand stung Hatfield's face and hands like sparks of fire. His mouth was dry and gritty. His eyes ached. So long as the

wind held steady from the east, the gorge was tenable, but should it shift slightly and blow more from the south, he would be in the midst of the swirling sand.

"Got to find out somethin' about this, though," he decided.

With a heave of his big shoulders he dumped the body of the owlhoot from the cart. Beneath it was a hollowed-out place where the salt had been scooped away. Hatfield set out to enlarge and deepen the hole.

"The hellions wasn't diggin' into that stuff just for fun," he told himself.

He had hardly begun removing the loose salt when his fingers struck something hard. He quickly realized that the heaped salt that apparently filled the cart was in reality a layer only a few inches in depth. His groping hands got hold of a rough, iregular fragment of stone. He levered it out, and for a moment forgot the storm and its sinister threat.

THE stone was seamed and cracked and crumbly and, sprinkled through it, thick as raisins in a pudding, were irregular lumps of a dull yellow color. Also there were crooked "wires" criss-crossing the surface of the rock. And the fragment was astonishingly heavy for its size.

Hatfield's lips pursed in a soundless whistle.

"Quartz," he muttered, staring at the fragment. "Broken, crumbly quartz. High-grade gold ore, with about the heaviest metal content I ever laid eyes on. If this darn cart is loaded with the stuff, and I've a notion it is, it's shore worth a mighty big hatful of pesos. No wonder them hellions were after it. Now what in blazes is the answer to this?"

As he stared at the fragment, Goldy suddenly gave a loud snort that was audible even above the roar of the wind. Hatfield's eyes jerked up. With astounding coordination of impulse and muscle, he went backward off the cart, turned a complete somersault in the air and landed on his feet back of the vehicle. And at that instant something yelled through the space his body had occupied an instant second before. Hands streaking to his guns, he crouched behind the cart and peered into the roaring south.

From the blinding sand cloud had emerged nearly a dozen horsemen. Smoke spurted from the muzzles of their leveled rifles. Bullets spatted the sand, thudded into the sides of the cart, whined between the spokes and under the bed. The Lone Wolf was suddenly in a very hot spot indeed.

Guns out and ready, Hatfield crouched behind the dubious shelter of the spoked wheels. He swore under his breath as lead continued to screech past. The owlhoots had pulled up just clear of the thicker sand cloud and were firing methodically with their rifles. And the distance was too great for his sixes to be effective. His own rifle was in the saddle-boot, and for all the good it was likely to do him might as well have been up in the Texas Panhandle.

"Of all the loco things to do," Hatfield thought wrathfully. "I might have known the hellions were liable to come sneakin' back, once they got over their scare and realized I didn't have a posse at my back. Should have kept my saddle-gun handy. Well, I'm liable to pay for the mistake with a punctured hide."

He glanced longingly at Goldy, watching proceedings with interested eyes. To attempt to cover the near hundred yards to the overhang would be just a nice convenient way to commit suicide. He knew the horse would come to him if he whistled, but the owlhoots would instantly divine the strategem and would down the sorrel long before he could reach the cart.

A moment before, Hatfield had dreaded a sudden shift of the wind. Now he earnestly desired it. Under cover of the dust he could get in the clear. But the blast continued to howl steadily from east to west. The thick curtain of the sand cloud was clearly defined just beyond the sheltering wall of buttes, and in its shallow fringe, the owlhoots sat their horses and fired with concentrated aim.

A bullet tore a jagged hole in Hatfield's shirt sleeve. Another burned a crease along the side of his neck. A third just flicked his cheek with lethal fingers. The high-wheeled cart afforded but a dubious shelter. Sooner or later one of the slugs was bound to find its mark.

Eyes bleak, face set in grim lines, the Lone Wolf half turned, his muscles tensing. There wasn't a chance in a thousand of his making it, but nevertheless he decided to try a dash for his rifle. Anything was better than being mowed down like

a setting quail.

But even as he turned, from the shadowy depths behind him sounded the clear metallic clang of a rifle. Hatfield sprawled forward on his face.

CHAPTER III

Out of the Desert

WITHOUT sound or motion, the Lone Wolf lay where he had fallen. Only his eyes shifted sideward toward the ominous depths of the gorge.

"Surrounded," he discovered. "One of the hellions must have slipped around through the dust and got behind me. Well, reckon it's all over this time."

The thought flashed through his mind while the echoes of the rifle shot were still banging back and forth among the buttes. Again the heavy boom tore through the dust-laden air. Instinctively Hatfield ducked closer to the sand. Almost instantly he realized he had heard no whine of a passing bullet. Instead, from the dust cloud to the south came loud yells. Screwing his head around he saw one of the owlhoots swaying in his saddle and clutching the horn for support. A third booming report, a wild ducking of heads, and the owlhoots whirled their horses and vanished into the sand storm. A fourth rifle shot speeded them on their way.

Hatfield did not hesitate. He bounded to his feet and streaked for Goldy and his Winchester. He breathed a quick gasp of relief as his hand closed on the walnut stock of the long gun. He jerked it from the boot and whirled about at the sound of clicking hoofs. Rifle at the ready, he waited.

Through the dusty shadows loomed a single rider. Hatfield stood tense. Then his eyes widened with astonishment as a clear, musical voice called:

"Looked like you were on a rather bad spot, cowboy, so I thought I'd better take a hand."

Hatfield stared. The rider, mounted on a fine roan horse, was a slender, big-eyed girl!

Hatfield found his voice. "Ma'am," he said, "that's puttin' it sort of mild. I figgered I was all set to take the Big Jump. Reckon I would have, if you hadn't happened along just when yuh did. That was a bad bunch."

The girl glanced around apprehensively.

"Don't you think we'd better be moving away from here before they get over their scare and decide to come back?" she suggested.

Hatfield chuckled. "I've a notion they'll keep on goin' this time," he said. "The storm looks to be lettin' up down there. They're pretty salty, but I don't figger they'll try it again after two bad starts."

"How did you come to get mixed up with them?" the girl asked.

Hatfield told her, in terse sentences. Her blue eyes darkened, and she shook her curly brown head.

"It was a foolhardy thing to do—ride up to a bunch like that all by yourself," she remarked disapprovingly.

"Reckon mebbe it was," Hatfield admitted, "but sometimes a move like that is the best. For all they knew there was a bunch with me, ridin' hard on my trail. Chances are that's just what they thought. So they trailed their ropes in a hurry. Where I made a mistake was in not figgerin' they were liable to come back after they got over their first scare and realized I wasn't poundin' after' em. Then, chances are, they figgered it out that I was by myself. Besides, they had a good reason for wantin' to come back for a look-see."

"And perhaps the storm was so bad down there they couldn't get through it," the girl hazarded.

"That's possible, too," Hatfield agreed. "Anyhow, they come back, and were making things uncomfortable warm for me." He added, "Ma'am, yuh got any notion who they might be?"

"I believe," the girl replied, "it was Quantrell and his bunch."

"Who's Quantrell?"

"Nobody knows for sure," she said. "To most folks in the section he's just a name—a name that's tied up with everything bad that's happened here in recent months, and there's been plenty. But he's a killer without an ounce of mercy in his make-up, one of the craftiest rustlers ever heard of, and a daring robber. Three times he's held up the stage that runs from the railroad to Gavilan, the cowtown at the head of Espejo Valley. He robbed the

Harqua Mine of its clean-up last month."

"How do folks know Quantrell is responsible for all that ruckus raisin'?"

THE girl shook her head.

"They don't know," she admitted, "but all the chores pulled off wear the same brand of cleverness and careful planning. It's hardly reasonable to believe that more than one such outfit is operating in this country, is it?"

"Would look sort of that way, but yuh never can tell," Hatfield replied. "Well, that darn storm is thickenin' up again. I've a notion we'd better get out of this hole before the wind shifts. By the way, how did you get here? By way of the trail?"

"No," the girl told him. "I came down Espejo Valley. There's a track over beside the buttes that turns west from them a few miles north of here and enters the valley mouth. I was riding down this way on the chance of meeting my cousin, Grant Emory. He and the boys are down here somewhere. Yesterday they rode on the trail of a bunch that widelooped a herd from the Forked S Ranch and headed for the River. I live at the Lazy R. My name's Sharon Remington."

Hatfield supplied his own name. The girl reached down a slender, sun-golden little hand and they shook gravely.

"Suppose you ride up to the ranchhouse with me?" she invited. "It's only a few miles. I've an idea you could use something decent to eat."

"Notion I could," Hatfield agreed. "Figger I'll take you up on that, ma'am. First, though, I want to look over that poor devil of a driver."

The girl nodded, and moved back a few paces. Hatfield strode to the slain driver and turned him over on his back. To his surprise the man was not a Mexican *peon* of the sort that usually transported salt from the lakes to the Rio Grande. He was a hard-bitten specimen who showed no signs of Indian blood. He had a straight gash of a mouth across his deeply tanned face, low cheek-bones, pale eyes, now set in death, and a shock of hair of a peculiar dead black color that seemed to interest the Ranger.

"Texan, and a miner, judgin' from the calluses on his hands," Hatfield mused. He noted the lighter coloring of the man's sunken cheeks. "Used to wear whiskers, and they grew up almost to his eyes. Scrawny specimen, but looks wiry. Packs a gun like he knew how to use it. No salt freighter, that's shore, although he might be able to pass for one, especially with that hat pulled down low, if nobody happened to look too close. Chances are that's why he shaved the whiskers off. *Peons* don't often have much beard."

In the driver's pockets was nothing of significance. Hatfield was about to turn away when he noticed the corner of what looked to be a sheet of paper protruding from the front of the dead man's ragged shirt. He drew it out.

It *was* paper, of a sort,, having the appearance of ancient sheepskin manuscript. It was stained with the slain man's blood. Across its surface fine lines were drawn. Hatfield studied it, his black brows drawing together.

"What is it?" the girl asked curiously.

"Looks to be a map," the Ranger said. "A mighty fine piece of work, too."

"A map of what?"

"Hard to say," Hatfield replied. "Look it over. You know this country. Perhaps yuh can figger somethin' from it."

Sharon Remington took the blood-smeared paper gingerly and bent her brows over it in the dim light.

"It is certainly a map of Espejo Valley," she said. "I recognize a number of things. Over here to the right is Perdida Peak, with the Dead Star Trail. And see—way up to the right and farther over—the salt flats. And way down to the left is Mule Ears Peak. It's marked plainly—a double peak that looks like a mule's ears. We can see it after we round the buttes. And the western range runs north and curves a little to the east, just as the Perdida Range runs north, only it drops away sharply to the east to widen the valley. But I can't make anything of these lines that crisscross the thing. I'm sure it's a map of the valley, though."

HATFIELD nodded. He had already arrived at that conclusion.

"The mountain ranges are marked plain," he said. "But the lines drawn seem to run every which way without makin' any sense. There's a key to it somewheres, of course, but unless yuh hit on that, the whole business don't mean anything. Just the same, though, I figger I'll hang on to

it. Might have somethin' to do with why that poor jigger was gunned down. That, and what's in the cart."

"What's that?"

Hatfield retrieved the fragment of gold ore he had let fall when he had dived from the top of the salt cart. The girl eyed it curiously.

"I don't know anything much about such things," she admitted. "Perhaps my cousin could tell you where it came from. He is familiar with the mines around here."

Hatfield nodded again, and stowed the fragment of rock away.

"I'll hang onto this, too," he said. He looked at the body of the driver. "Reckon we'd better leave him where he is," he decided. "Gavilan is the county seat, ain't it? Should be a sheriff there and he ought to be notified of what happened down here. Chances are he'd rather have the bodies left just where they are. But we'll take the salt cart along with us. Its load is a mite too valuable to leave down here unguarded. You wait here a minute, ma'am. Keep yore rifle ready and an eye on the trail to the south, though I don't think there's anything to worry about."

He forked Goldy and rode back to the cave that had provided him shelter from the storm. He retrieved his blanket and other belongings. Returning to the cart, he carefully covered the driver's body with the blanket, weighting it down with heavy stones. Those of the two owlhoots he left where they lay.

There was no difficulty in getting the docile oxen turned and lumbering north through the gorge, drawing the creaking cart after them.

"I thought it was funny, when I first saw it, that the feller would be usin' four head of stock to pull his cart," Hatfield told Sharon Remington. "Two is the usual number, and all that's needed. With water scarce like it is on this trail, the drivers don't take along animals they don't need. What he was pullin' is a lot heavier'n a cartload of salt."

As they progressed, the line of buttes, almost a solid wall of stone, veered slightly to the west, with a swelling ridge on the right. A mile, or so, and the last flanking mass was passed and the glory and splendor of Espejo Valley opened before them.

To the west were mountains, blue and

Fingers like steel bit into Jim Hatfield's shoulder, and he was hurled aside with prodigious force (CHAP. VI)

purple against the morning sky, their crests touched with flame, little more than five miles distant here in the narrow gut that led to the desert, but falling away sharply as the curve of the valley widened, until in the northwest they were shadowy with distance. To the east were more mountains, much closer, with the towering bulk of Perdida forming their southmost tip.

And between the dark walls, a good thirty miles in breadth, was a great grass-grown and wooded cup, shimmering like a cluster of emeralds in the sunlight. Far to the northwest was a smudge of smoke against the blue, marking the site of Gavilan, the cow and mining town at the head of the valley.

The mountains on the right veered rather sharply, increasing greatly the width of the valley toward its head. In the distance, Hatfield could just make out the ghostly shimmer of the salt flats that washed their base like a motionless silver sea.

THE track they had been following turned more to the west.

"Our ranchhouse is less than two miles from here, over beyond that wooded rise," Sharon said.

"A mighty pretty country," Hatfield said. "Looks to be prime cow country. Yore cousin owns the spread?"

"No," Sharon replied. "I own it. Grant Emory is not really my cousin. There is no blood relation between us. My father married again, nearly ten years after my mother died. His second wife was Grant Emory's aunt, and I was taught to call him Cousin Grant. Aunt Liza, as I always called Dad's second wife, died four years ago. Grant worked for a spread up at the head of the valley, over next to the salt lakes, and visited us often. Then, three months ago, Dad—died. Grant volunteered to come and run the spread for me. He's an excellent cattleman."

Hatfield nodded. "Running a big spread is a hefty chore for a girl," he conceded.

Sharon smiled. "And cowhands don't like to work for a woman boss. I guess you know that."

"Loco, but true," Hatfield admitted.

They toiled up the sag, reached its crest, and the Lazy R *casa* and other buildings lay before them in the near distance.

"The spread runs from the desert ten miles north, and from this rise west," Sharon observed.

"West to the mountains?"

"Farther than that," Sharon said. "Our western line is the far slope of that big ridge. Dad obtained title to the Lazy R from the state. Later he included that section of the hills. Why, I don't know. They're nothing but a pile of rocks where nothing will grow. The canyons, and there are lots of them, that cut this side of the ridge, provide shelter from storms and heat, of course, but otherwise the hills have no value, so far as anybody has ever known. Dad had some notion about them, though."

CHAPTER IV

The Lazy R

SHORTLY afterward Hatfield and Sharon drew up to the ranchhouse. Sharon called a wrangler to look after the horses and the oxen. The hand, a grizzled old-timer, gave Hatfield a sharp look, but asked no questions. Sharon led the way into the house, which was large and well-built.

"I'll tell the cook to get busy," she said, leaving Hatfield in the living room which was spacious and comfortably furnished.

Hatfield immediately became interested in the profusion of books in shelves that lined the walls. He was more than a little surprised to note a large number of highly technical works dealing with such subjects as Geology, Petrology, Practical Mining, Advanced Mining Methods, Prospecting as a Science, and so on. Jim Hatfield, before he entered the Rangers, had had three years in a famous college of engineering, and he had never lost interest in the subject.

"Somebody hereabouts is more'n just a cattleman or cowhand," he mused.

Seating himself in a roomy chair, he rolled a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully until Sharon rejoined him. A little later they adjourned to the dining room in answer to the cook's call.

Hatfield enjoyed a good breakfast. He also enjoyed the blue-eyed girl's conversation. She was thoroughly conversant with range work and ranch problems.

"Our troubles here are the usual Big Bend problems," she told him. "Getting our beefs to market, and keeping them out of the hands of wideloopers. Now that the railroad has come through Dorantes to the north, the first one is no longer so pressing, but the second I suppose we will always have with us, and be forced to deal with it in the same ways."

"With a gun and a rope?" Hatfield asked smilingly.

"Yes," Sharon said, her eyes darkening, "but I prefer the methods of law and order. That is what we need more than anything else—good law enforcement."

"What's wrong with the sheriff of the county?" Hatfield asked.

Sharon shrugged her slim shoulders.

"Oh, Tom Reeves is all right," she said, "but I fear his ability is limited to plenty of courage, strict honesty and a fast gun hand."

"Good things, all of 'em," Hatfield chuckled, "but none of 'em a substitute for brains."

"And brains are what we are up against here right now, or I'm a lot mistaken," the girl replied soberly. "Brains joined with courage, fast gun hands, and *dis*-honesty."

"Bad combination," Hatfield admitted, his black brows drawing together.

A clatter of hoofs sounded outside. Sharon sprang to her feet.

"Here come Grant and the boys!" she exclaimed. "Oh, somebody has been hurt!"

She ran lightly to the door, onto the veranda and down the steps. Hatfield followed her, gazing at the horsemen who were dismounting in the ranchhouse yard. He counted ten men in all.

Foremost was a tall, well-set-up, broad-shouldered man of about thirty. He had a tight-lipped mouth, clear gray, slightly narrow eyes, a prominent nose and high cheek-bones. He was darkly tanned, startlingly so in contrast to his pale eyes and the tawny hair that swept back from his big forehead in a crinkly wave. Hatfield rightly surmised that he was Grant Emory.

All of the riders were thickly powdered with the dust of the desert, and all looked weary. One man, Hatfield quickly noted, carried his right arm in a sling. The left shoulder of another was roughly bandaged with what looked to be part of a shirt. The bandage showed blood stains. His face was livid and he swayed in his saddle. Two of his companions helped him to dismount.

Sharon Remington was asking swift, anxious questions of the tawny-haired man.

"Uh-huh, we caught up with 'em, all right," Grant Emory answered her question. "Ran into 'em this mornin', down on the desert. Trouble is they saw us first. Were all set for us and gunned us proper. Before we could get straightened out they streaked away in that infernal sand storm and we couldn't catch 'em up. Willoby has a hole in his arm. I'm scared Lem Nelson is bad hurt—bullet through his shoulder."

HATFIELD had drawn near by this time. Sharon introduced him.

"This is my cousin, Grant Emory," she told the Ranger, "and these are my hands." She told her cousin, "I've a notion Mr. Hatfield ran into the same bunch."

Grant Emory looked the Lone Wolf up and down with hard, suspicious eyes, but his hand was cordial enough.

"How was that?" he asked.

Hatfield told him, stressing Sharon's part in the affair.

"Good work," grunted Emory. "Want to hear more about it, and about that cart load of gold ore. Right now I've got to hightail to town and get the doctor for Willoboy and Nelson. I'm worried about Nelson."

"Suppose yuh let me have a look at him," Hatfield suggested. "I've had a mite of experience with such things."

Emory eyed him doubtfully, then shrugged. "Reckon yuh can't do any harm," he grunted. "It'll take a long time to get the doctor."

Hatfield hurried to the barn. From his saddlebags he took a small medicine case. When he returned he glanced keenly at Nelson who, under his instructions, had been placed reclining on a blanket. He charged a hypodermic needle with the utmost care with a hundredth-grain portion

of a drug and injected it into the wounded man's arm.

"Heart stimulant—nitroglycerin," he told Emory. "Figger his heart needs a mite of help."

With deft, gentle fingers he cut away the blood-soaked bandage, laying bare an ugly-looking wound low down in Nelson's shoulder. He probed the area with his fingers.

"No bones busted," was his verdict, "but it's a bad one, and he's lost a lot of blood."

He swiftly cleansed the wound, applied an antiseptic salve. Then he bandaged it with an expertness that caused the watching hands to exclaim.

"Feller, if you ain't a sawbones, yuh ought to be!" declared Emory.

"Just the same, yuh'd better get a regular doctor here to have a look at him," Hatfield advised. "There's one at Gavilan?"

"Uh-huh," answered Emory. "A old jigger who showed up a couple of months back. Got white whiskers and a shorthorn's disposition, but he shore knows his business. Name of McChesney, I recollect."

Hatfield glanced up quickly as Emory pronounced the doctor's name, but proferred no comment other than a nod.

"Get this feller to bed," he told Emory. "Four of yuh pack him on the blanket, and handle him easy."

Willoby's wound, a clean hole through the flesh of his upper arm, gave the Ranger no concern. He cleansed it, applied a bandage, readjusted the sling.

"Yuh'll be doin' yore chores again in a couple of weeks," he told the cowboy.

"And now," said Emory, "I'd like to have a look at what's in that cart."

Under his orders, shovels were brought, and the loose salt tossed from the cart, revealing the clumsy body heaped with the valuable ore.

"It looks like Harqua Mine rock," said Emory, after carefully examining the fragment. "Uh-huh, looks a heap like it, but I can't be shore. If it is, somebody is shore doin' a prime fancy job of high-gradin' up there. Wonder how in blazes they got it out and didn't get caught doin' it? They ride herd mighty close on the high-grade up there. This load is worth plenty, too."

The men of Emory's crew were silent as he spoke, but Hatfield, who missed nothing of what went on around him, noted a sardonic gleam in the eyes of one grizzled old-timer, and a derisive twitching of his thin lips.

Emory turned to Sharon. "I'll have a bite to eat, then I'll ride to town and get Doc," he told her.

Hatfield spoke up. "Yuh look sort of peaked, feller, as naturally yuh would be after buckin' that sand storm," he said. "I was figgerin' on ridin' to town anyhow, to tell the sheriff about what happened this mornin', so why not let me take the word to the doctor for yuh?"

EMORY glanced around quickly.

"That would be mighty fine of yuh," he said in grateful tones. "I admit I don't feel much like buckin' them forty miles right now."

To Hatfield's surprise, Sharon Remington put in a word.

"I think I'll ride with you, Mr. Hatfield," she said. "I wanted to get to town today, and I'd rather not take the ride alone."

"Be a pleasure, ma'am," Hatfield assured her.

From the corner of his eye he noted a quick hardening of Grant Emory's face, a tightening of his lips. But the ranch foreman only nodded his agreement.

"Yuh'll stay in town over night of course?" he asked of the girl.

"Yes," Sharon told him.

"I'll try and ride up in the mornin' and come back with yuh," Emory promised.

"It isn't necessary, Grant," the girl replied. "I know you have plenty to do right now, and with two of the boys laid up, we'll be short-handed. I'll be all right. Perhaps," she added, "Mr. Hatfield will see fit to ride back with me."

Emory's lips compressed again, but once more he nodded agreement.

"That'll be fine—hope he will," he said.

He turned on his heel and entered the ranchhouse. The eyes of the old-timer who had been silently listening, held a mocking gleam.

A little later, Hatfield and Sharon Remington rode north together. For a mile or two they rode practically in silence.

"I've a notion yore cousin didn't take it over kind for yuh to ride to town with me," the Ranger remarked suddenly.

Sharon's blue eyes danced. "Grant is consumed with jealousy if I look twice at

any man," she said. "Poor dear, he fancies he is in love with me."

"Fancies?"

Sharon glanced around. The Lone Wolf's face was serious, but his strangely colored eyes were sunny as summer seas. Sharon colored, dropped her gaze, and changed the subject.

"Ahead and to the west is the Forked S, the spread that lost the cows yesterday," she said. "John Slater owns it. To the east is the Scab Eight, Weston Hale's spread. Then comes the Tadpole and the Fiddle-Back."

CHAPTER V

Range Doctor

HATFIELD listened, with little comment, as Sharon chattered on about the valley and its inhabitants. His steady eyes were continually studying the terrain, and missing nothing.

The hills to the west, craggy, dark, slashed by canyons and gorges, seemed to interest him. Their slopes were practically naked, evidently being too rocky or too devoid of moisture to afford root-hold for large growth, although bristles of thicket were in evidence from time to time.

The prairie, green and amethyst, heavily grown with grass and boasting numerous groves, stretched to the beginning of the lower slopes, where the transition from fertile ground to arid was surprisingly sudden. From the crests of rises the riders could catch an occasional glimpse of the gray ribbon of the Dead Star Trail, far to the east, winding wearily northward.

They had covered perhaps three-fourths of the distance to town when Sharon gestured to a large white ranchhouse set on a hill to the left.

"That's the Shanghai M *casa*—Talbot Morrow owns it," she said. "Talbot was born here, I understand, but he left this country years ago. He came back six months ago, shortly after old Arnold Morrow, his father, died. Poor fellow, he's a cripple."

"A cripple?"

"Yes. His legs are paralyzed. He has to be lifted from his chair, and into his buckboard when he wishes to go somewhere. A fine-looking man, too. It's a pity."

Hatfield nodded agreement. "Always been crippled?" he asked.

"No, I guess not," Sharon replied. "He was injured some way a few years ago, I was told. I think he was shot. The bullet injured his spine."

The sun was low in the west when they reached the sprawling cowtown set in the shadow of the western hills. Miles farther to the northeast, where the Perdida Range ended, was the weird desolation of the salt flats, dotted with strange, shifting dunes that gleamed like heaps of jewels in the red rays of the setting sun. And on across the flats, its deep depression at times silted with the wind-blown salt, ran the Dead Star Trail.

"The Harqua and the other mines are on that long slope you can see over to the west," Sharon explained to Hatfield as they rode through the straggling outskirts of the town. Their office is here. Perhaps they can tell you something about that gold ore that was in the cart."

"Reckon I'll drop in and see them, after I talk with the sheriff and the doctor," Hatfield said. "A place for you to stay here tonight, ma'am?"

"Yes," Sharon replied. "The Cattleman's Hotel is all right. You can get a room there, too, if you wish. They are seldom filled up, except on pay day nights."

They turned into the crooked main street of the town, which was lined with shops, saloons, dance halls and gambling places boasting much plate glass and deceptive false fronts. Here and there a two-storied "skyscraper" loomed in dignified isolation. The Cattleman's Hotel was one of them.

"Right across the street is the doctor's office," said Sharon. "I suppose we should stop there first."

"Good notion," Hatfield agreed.

He tied Sharon's horse, let Goldy's split reins trail on the ground. Together they entered the office.

The white-bearded old doctor looked up, his eyes narrowed a trifle, but he merely grunted a greeting. He listened to their request.

"I'll ride down there in an hour or so,"

he told them. "You say you strapped him up? Reckon he'll do all right for a while, then."

After they left the doctor's office, Hatfield started to take Sharon across the street to the hotel.

"I'm going to the sheriff's office with you first," she said. "After all, I was there too this morning when those men were killed."

Hatfield gave her a quick glance, then nodded.

THEY found the sheriff seated at a table, glowering at some reward notices. He was a small man with craggy features and snapping black eyes. His movements were swift and accurate. But his brow wrinkled querulously as if he were bearing up under great mental strain, as Hatfield briefly related the details of the encounter on the Dead Star Trail.

"It was Quantrell and his hellions, all right," the sheriff declared with conviction. "Yuh say they ran a herd off the Slash K, too, Miss Remington? Why wasn't I notified?"

"I guess the boys didn't want to take the time," Sharon replied. "Or perhaps they didn't think of it."

"Taking the law in their own hands!" the sheriff growled. "They'll get in trouble that way some time. All right, I'll ride down to the desert first thing in the mornin'."

"And now I suppose you'll want to visit the Harqua Mine offices?" Sharon remarked to Hatfield when they were in the street once more.

"Reckon so," the Ranger agreed. "I'm taking up a lot of your time, ma'am."

"Oh, I'm enjoying it." Sharon dimpled. "I thought the sheriff was going to bite me when I told him the boys forgot to tell him about the widelooping. Sheriff Tom takes himself seriously, but I'm afraid nobody else does."

The Harqua Mine superintendent examined the fragment of ore with keen attention.

"It looks like some of the rock we have taken from high-grade pockets," he said finally, "but I can't be sure without comparing it carefully with specimens known to come from the Harqua. Not that there is much doubt about it in my mind," he added quickly. "There is no other ore like this produced any place else in the section. I'm just making the point that the mine cannot claim that cart load on the mere assumption it is from our mine. We would have to establish ownership definitely, a thing difficult to do under the circumstances.

"Neither of you recognized the driver? No? That's a pity. What I'm much more interested in than in the load of ore is how in blazes did they get away from the mine without being detected. We keep a strict watch on our high-grade, of that you can rest assured."

"Looks sort of like an inside job," Hatfield suggested.

"It certainly does," the super agreed, his face hardening. "And it will be my urgent business to find out how it was done. I'll hang onto this specimen of ore, if you don't mind, and have it carefully analyzed."

As they left the mine office, a buckboard drew up before the building and stopped. The driver was a cowhand. Beside him sat a man with a blanket spread across his knees. He was a handsome man with features of cameolike regularity, steady blue eyes, and black hair with a touch of gray at the temples. He was erect in bearing, broad of shoulder, deep of chest, and evidently of good height. His hands, that lay motionless on his blanketed knees, Hatfield noticed, were broad, muscular and deeply bronzed.

Sharon nodded to him, and the man nodded back without speaking.

"It's Talbot Morrow," the girl said in low tones, as they passed on.

"Nice looking jigger," Hatfield commented.

"Yes, he is," Sharon agreed, "and he seems to be nice, too, although he has little to say. Men who work for him say he knows the cattle business. He keeps his ranch in fine shape and raises first-class beef. I think he has an interest in the Harqua Mine also. He often stops to chat with the superintendent."

At the hotel, Hatfield established Sharon in a comfortable room. He also got one for himself.

"I'm going out to do some shopping," she told him. "See you in the morning."

"All right," Hatfield agreed. "I'll look after the horses. There's a livery stable

on the alley around the corner, I understand."

Before attending to the chore, however, Hatfield paused in his room. He lighted the lamp that stood on a table, took the blood-smeared map of Espejo Valley from his pocket and spread it under the light. As he bent over it, his brows suddenly drew together. In the strong light he saw what he had missed in the gloom of the gorge.

ALMOST obliterated by the blood smear were tiny letters. With some difficulty he spelled them out:

V of Perdida to Harqua—Perdida W

"Now what in blazes?" he wondered. "Doesn't seem to make any sense."

He examined the writing again, shaking his black head over it.

"That's shore what it seems to make out," he growled. "'V of Perdida to Harqua—Perdida W.' Must have some meaning, but what? I've a notion it means plenty, all right."

He studied the lines drawn on the paper, came to the conclusion that Sharon Remington had been right in her guess. It was undoubtedly a map of the valley. The hills to the west, the wide upper portion, the narrow neck that led to the desert, with Perdida Peak shown with exaggerated prominence at the southern tip of the Perdida Range. The position of the Harqua Mine, he decided, was designated by a tiny circlet on the slope west of the town.

"Looks like mebbe it points out the route that should be followed by whoever lifts the high-grade from the mine," he mused. "But the letterin' has shore got me guessin'. No, it don't seem to make sense, but I'll bet a hatful of pesos it's the key to the whole thing."

Finally, with a baffled exclamation, he folded the sheet compactly and stowed it with the note in the secret pocket of his belt.

The livery stable proved satisfactory. Hatfield arranged for accommodations for Goldy and Sharon's roan. Then he sauntered along the main street with thoughts of a good meal in mind.

A large saloon that boasted a long lunch counter, and tables for more leisurely patrons, caught his eye. He entered, found a table and gave his order to a white-aproned waiter. He looked the place over with interest.

Although it was barely dusk, the big room was already pretty well crowded. The occupants were chiefly cowhands, drinking at the bar, eating, bucking the roulette wheels, the faro bank, or absorbed in poker. As the darkness deepened, numbers of miners in muddy boots and red or blue woolen shirts trooped in. Local shopkeepers and workers were also in evidence.

What interested Hatfield more was a sprinkling of individuals who wore rangeland garb and looked like cowhands, but who, the Ranger decided, were not.

"Notion this pueblo is a sort of stoppin'-off place for gents on their way from the north to the Border, or the other way around," he mused. "Some salty-lookin' members here."

As he ate, he was conscious of more

[*Turn page*]

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than one sideward glance cast in his direction. Evidently a stranger came in for a careful going-over.

It indeed struck Hatfield that there was a tenseness about the place, a furtive air of suspicion, held in leash but nevertheless apparent. As if nobody was quite sure about his neighbor.

"Reckon no gent is certain but what the jigger standin' next to him may be Quantrell or one of his outfit," the Ranger decided.

After finishing his meal, Hatfield sat for some time smoking, apparently deep in thought. Finally he pinched out his cigarette butt and rose to his feet.

"Figger I'll show this loco map to the mine superintendent and see if he can make anything of it," he told himself. "Recall he said he was goin' to work late tonight and might find time to give that hunk of rock a goin' over."

Casually he sauntered out of the place.

CHAPTER VI

Guns in the Dark

AFTER leaving the saloon, Hatfield turned up a quieter side street on which the mine office building was located, some little distance from the main thoroughfare. He was pleased to note a dim glow shining back of the dusty window panes.

With light, almost noiseless steps he entered the building through the open main door, followed a deserted corridor for a short distance and reached the door of the super's office. He had raised his hand to knock when saw that the door stood near half open.

He stepped forward, his glance seeking the official's desk. Then with bewildering speed he hurled himself sideward and down. A gun boomed, a slug hissed past his face, and thudded into the wall.

Hatfield jerked his guns as a shadowy figure leaped forward and swept the lighted lamp from the super's desk. Darkness blanketed the room, through which gushed lances of reddish fire. The walls rocked to the roar of six-shooters.

Twisting, writhing on the floor, changing position each time he pulled trigger, Hatfield answered the blazing guns shot for shot. Bullets slashed the floor around him, knocked splinters into his face, thudded into the wall. He felt one rip his sleeve, another whip his hat sideward on his head. There was a clatter of breaking glass and splintering wood.

Hatfield bounded to his feet and leaped forward, guns ready. He collided with a body, slashed out with a gun-barrel. He heard the man grunt with pain. Then fingers like rods of nickel steel bit into his shoulder. He was hurled aside with prodigious force. He staggered, reeled, pitched over an unseen chair and hit the floor with a crash. Before he could regain his feet there was a second clattering of glass, followed by a patter of swift feet outside the smashed window.

For tense moments Hatfield lay where he had fallen, listening intently. The room was still save for a mumbling mutter over to one side. Finally he got cautiously to his feet, listened, took a chance, and fumbled a match. He struck it, held it at arm's length an instant and dashed it to the floor. The quick flare had shown him he was alone in the room save for a huddled form that moved feebly against the far wall.

Hatfield risked another match. He shot a quick glance at the form on the floor. The movements were more vigorous, but still uncoordinated.

The desk lamp was smashed, but there was a bracket lamp on the wall nearby. Hatfield touched the match flame to the wick, the room was bathed in a soft glow. He strode across to the prostrate man and turned him over on his back. He uttered an exclamation as he recognized the superintendent.

The super opened his eyes, stared blankly at the Ranger bending over him. Another moment and he fully regained consciousness. Hatfield propped him into a sitting position.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Don't know," mumbled the super. "I was working at my desk and turned around when I heard a sound behind me. Got a glimpse of two men wearing black masks. Then one hit me over the head with something—a gun-barrel, I reckon. Don't remember anything else."

Hatfield helped him to his feet, guided

him to a chair. "Yuh got a knot on yore head, but I figger it's nothin' serious," he decided, after a swift examination. "But they shore made a mess of yore office."

Which was decidedly not an overstatement. Drawers had been jerked out, their contents dumped and scattered about. A filing case had been emptied on the floor. Papers from the desk were scattered on the floor.

Outside was a sound of shouting, drawing swiftly nearer. A moment more and boots pounded in the corridor. Several men rushed into the office. In the lead was Sheriff Tom Reeves. He glared suspiciously at Hatfield.

"What in the thunder's goin' on here?" he demanded harshly.

HATFIELD and the super told him, briefly. The sheriff swore.

"What in blazes were they after?" he asked.

"That's what I'd like to know," grunted the super. "There's nothing of value ever kept here. We don't even have a safe."

"Well, they shore gave the place a goin' over," growled the sheriff. He turned to Hatfield. "Yuh get a look at 'em?"

"Not much," the Ranger replied. "About all I saw was the blaze of a gun before the light went out. They shore threw lead fast for a minute, then went through the window."

"Big fellers?" asked the sheriff.

"Reckon one was pretty sizable, from the way he took hold of me," Hatfield said. "Had a grip like a bear trap."

"Figger yuh hit either one of 'em?"

"I figger I hit one, with a gun-barrel, from the way he yelped when I swiped at him. Don't reckon any of my lead connected. No blood spots anywhere."

The sheriff swore some more.

"Well," he declared, "they'd shore ought to got some scratches goin' through the glass. That's somethin' to be keepin' a eye open for—gents with chopped-up faces. Not that the hellions wouldn't have a alibi for it. I figger they got plenty of savvy." He nodded to his companions. "Come on, you fellers. We'll look the ground over outside and see if we can pick up a trail. Reckon they scooted down the alley." He asked the super, "You all right, Hodges?"

"Oh, I'm all right, aside from a headache," the mine official replied. "I'll start straightening up this mess."

"I'll lend yuh a hand," Hatfield offered.

The sheriff hesitated, shooting a swift glance at the Lone Wolf, but when the super accepted the offer, the lawman made no comment.

A moment later his boots pounded down the corridor.

"It sure beats me," said the super, as they began replacing drawers and righting chairs. "I can't imagine what they were after. I was just going to give that ore fragment a going over with a microscope when . . . Say, where is that chunk, anyhow? It was right over here on my desk."

A thorough search of the room failed to discover the fragment.

"Reckon one of the hellions pocketed it," the super finally decided. "Well, it doesn't matter. They can send up another chunk from the cart. They have it down at the Lazy R, I believe you said."

Hatfield nodded, his eyes thoughtful. After the office was straightened up somewhat, he broached the subject of his visit.

The super took the map and studied it. "It's a map of the valley, all right," he agreed, "but that seems to be all. Let's go over it with a glass and see if we can find anything more."

But a careful scrutiny of the paper revealed nothing more, the glass merely corroborating Hatfield's translation of the minute letters beneath the blood stain.

"And what that means is anybody's guess," said the super. "I've a notion your supposition is right—it plots the route to be taken by the high-graders, only it doesn't show where they go after leaving the valley. Mexico, I suppose. Easy to dispose of the ore down there."

Hatfield nodded, but said nothing. The concentration furrow was deep between his black brows. A sure sign the Lone Wolf was doing some hard thinking.

"Well," said the super, "things are in pretty good shape again. I think I'll go home. My head doesn't feel so good."

They left the office together. At the Cattleman's Hotel, where the official had a room, Hatfield said good night. He walked slowly along the main street, still thinking deeply. He had just reached the swinging doors of the Ace Full Saloon when a man came out.

THE man was Grant Emory. His face was scratched and bruised, and he looked to be in a decidedly bad temper. He recognized Hatfield and grunted a greeting.

"I don't know what this place is comin' to," he barked indignantly. "Gettin' so a man ain't safe anywhere. I was just ridin' into town when a couple of hellions came skalleyhootin' along the trail and ran smack into me. Knocked my hoss plumb off his feet and stood me on my head in the dirt. Before I could get myself together and unlimber my gun they were out of sight in the brush. Shore wish I could have lined sights with the sidewinders. I feel all stove up."

"Get a look at them?" Hatfield asked.

"Shucks, no," growled Emory. "There waren't much light and they was a-streakin' it. All I saw was a couple big jiggers loomin' up in front of me when their hosses, or one of 'em, hit mine. I was just moseyin' along, so they had the advantage. . . . Where's Sharon?"

"In her room at the hotel by now, I reckon," Hatfield replied. "She had some shoppin' chores to do, but the chances are she finished 'em by this time."

"Let's go back in and have a drink together, then," said Emory. "I'll ride to the spread with her tomorrow. By the way, are yuh hangin' around in this neck of the woods, or just passin' through?"

"Haven't made any connections yet," Hatfield evaded. "Might hang around if I can tie onto a job of ridin'."

Emory looked speculative. "Gettin' close to roundup time," he observed. "Easy for a tophand to tie up with an outfit. Keep yore cinch tight until tomorrow. I want to speak to Sharon, then I'd like to have a talk with yuh."

"All right," Hatfield agreed. "Let's get that drink."

As they stood at the bar, discussing their drink, and talking, the swinging doors were pushed open and a man entered, a slim, immaculate-looking man who lent an air of elegance to his homely range attire. He had a thin, strongly featured face, a crisp mustache and an aggressive tuft of beard on his prominent chin. His eyes, Hatfield noted, were a cold light blue, the blue of a glacier lake. He glanced swiftly about, his gaze fixed on Emory, and his finely formed lips twisted in a derisive smile.

Hatfield saw Emory flush, saw his jaw tighten, his hands ball into fists. He met the other man's gaze, his own eyes hard and defiant. But no word was spoken. The dapper man passed to the far end of the bar, walking with easy grace, his shoulders square, his slender body erect with soldierly bearing.

"Bad blood betwen those two," Hatfield told himself, with conviction.

He wondered who the man might be. Grant Emory supplied the deficiency.

"Walsh Knox, Talbot Morrow's foreman," he remarked, jerking his head at the receding back. "Morrow owns the Shanghai M, one of the best spreads in the country. He's a cripple."

"I saw him today, settin' in his buckboard in front of the Harqua Mine office," Hatfield said.

Emory nodded. "Uh-huh, he's in bad shape. Knox runs the spread for him. A salty jigger, Knox."

"Looks it," Hatfield agreed.

Before Emory could make any further remark, the doors swung open and Sheriff Reeves entered, looking much disgruntled. His gaze fixed on Emory's scratched face, and Hatfield saw his eyes narrow. He walked up to the foreman.

"What happened to you?" he demanded.

CHAPTER VII

No Dead Men

EMORY told the sheriff the story he had told Hatfield. The sheriff listened, his face expressionless. For a moment he was silent, then he turned to Hatfield.

"Couldn't find hide or hair of the hellions," he said. "We combed the whole town. That alley back of the office twists around among the shacks and dobes the miners live in and there are plenty of holes they could of slid into."

"Didn't figger yuh'd have much luck," Hatfield remarked.

Emory glanced inquiringly from one to the other. Hatfield explained what happened in the mine office. Emory shook his

head, and swore.

"This part of the country is gettin' worse every day," he growled.

"That's right," the sheriff agreed grimly. "Been gettin' worse and worse for the past six months."

The observation sounded innocent enough, but Hatfield saw Emory's jaw tighten. However, he made no comment.

"I'll ride down to the desert as soon as it's light, and have a look at them jiggers," the sheriff told Hatfield. "You better stick around, in case McChesney wants to hold an inquest. He's coroner."

Hatfield agreed. "And while yuh're at it, Sheriff," he said, "stop at the Lazy R and pick up another hunk of that ore from the cart. The mine superintendent wants to make a comparison with the Harqua high-grade. Those hellions tied onto the specimen I brought to town."

"I'll do it," said the sheriff. "Well, be seein' yuh. I'm goin' to drop my loop on a mite of shut-eye."

"Figger I'll do the same thing," Hatfield replied. "Didn't get over much last night, and it's been a long day."

The sheriff nodded and departed. Emory stared after him.

"Yuh say those jiggers went through the window?" he asked slowly.

"And took it with 'em," Hatfield answered.

Emory rasped his chin with his forefinger. "And were purty apt to have got a mite scratched up doin' it," he said. "I see why Reeves gave me such a once-over. He don't think over well of me, anyhow. Well, I did get bunged up by bein' knocked off my hoss, no matter what he thinks."

"He didn't accuse yuh of anything," Hatfield pointed out.

"No," agree Emory morosely, "but I know cussed well what he was thinkin'. Oh, let's go to bed."

Hatfield offered no objection to the suggestion and they left the saloon together. At the hotel, Emory said good night and passed on to his own room, farther down the corridor. Hatfield entered his room and lighted a lamp. He glanced around, his gaze fixed on the white pillow at the head of his bed, and held.

Pinned to the pillow slip was a fragment of smeary paper. Across it was penciled a rude scrawl. Hatfield's eyes narrowed as he read the two words:

Git out

The writing was indubitably the same as that which featured the warning note concealed in his secret pocket. . . .

Hatfield awoke early the following morning. He was seated by the window, smoking a cigarette and thinking, when a knock sounded at the door. He opened it to admit Grant Emory.

"Me and Sharon were just headin' out for breakfast," said the foreman. "She wants yuh to go along."

"Be plumb pleased to," Hatfield agreed.

"I wanted to talk to you," the girl said, after they were seated at a table in the hotel dining room. "I spoke with Grant about the matter, and he agrees with me. We are shorthanded right now, and with the roundup season coming on. Would you care to sign up with the Lazy R? Grant needs an assistant badly. Some of our boys are pretty old, and most of the others are young, and a trifle wild."

"Good hands, but regular young hellers," Emory put in. "They know their chores, but they need somebody to hold 'em down all the time. I can't be everywhere at once, and with things like they are hereabouts, I'd like mighty well to have a man on hand who can carry out orders and see that others carry 'em out, too. What yuh say, feller?"

HATFIELD considered a moment. He had arrived at no definite decision relative to the status of Emory, but one thing he had definitely decided—that the Lazy R was likely to be the focal point, in one way or another, of what went on in the vicinity. A job with the outfit would give him a logical excuse for hanging around.

"Reckon I could do worse," he obliquely accepted the proferred job.

"Fine!" applauded Emory.

Sharon Remington smiled, and looked pleased. "We'll start back for the spread as soon as we finish eating," she decided.

When they arose from the table, Hatfield excused himself for a short time.

"I'll be with you by the time you're ready to head south," he told his companions. "I want to see Hodges, the mine super, a minute."

He found Hodges in his office, apparently none the worse for his harrowing experience of the night before. He greeted Hatfield cordially.

"Feel all right," he told the Ranger. "Head is a little sore, but no aches."

"Glad to hear it," Hatfield said. "By the way, suh, I believe yuh said the two jiggers who larruped yuh was masked?"

"That's right," Hodges agreed. "I saw that much, anyhow."

"Handkerchief around the lower part of the face?" Hatfield asked.

Hodges shook his head. "No, their faces were completely covered, except for eyeholes. I'd say they had the masks strapped tight around their heads. Not a chance to see their features—only the glint of eyes through the holes."

Hatfield nodded, apparently pleased at what he had just heard. He thanked the super and departed, promising to have another specimen of the ore sent him for examination.

"Fact is, I told Sheriff Reeves to pick up a chunk and bring it along with him on his way back from the desert," he explained.

A little later Hatfield rode south with Sharon and Grant Emory. They rode steadily at a good pace until they were passing over the Forked S range, just north of the Lazy R holdings. Here Emory pulled up.

"You and Sharon mosey on to the *casa,*" he told Hatfield. "I'm goin' to slide over to John Slater's place and find out if him and his boys got any line on them wideloopers. Be seein' yuh a little later."

He turned west across the prairie. Hatfield and Sharon continued on south. Finally they came in sight of the Lazy R ranchhouse. As they drew near they observed a man pacing backward and forwards across the veranda with short, jerky strides.

"It's Sheriff Reeves!" exclaimed Sharon. "And something is bothering him. He always prances that way when he's put out over something."

They dismounted in front of the ranchhouse and ascended the steps to join the sheriff, who was looking very irritable indeed.

"Are you plumb loco?" he barked at Hatfield.

"Can't say for shore," the Lone Wolf returned. "Reckon I'll leave that to other folks' judgment."

The sheriff glared at him accusingly. "If yuh leave it to me, I'm of a mind to answer yes," he declared. "Thought yuh told me there were three bodies for me to look over down there on the Dead Star Trail at the edge of the desert!"

"Come to think of it, believe I did," Hatfield said.

"Well, yuh're either loco or yuh was seein' things!" growled the sheriff. "There shore ain't none down there now."

"No?"

"No! And that's just what I mean. We didn't find even one, much less three. Yuh shore yuh didn't make up that yarn yuh told me?"

"Sheriff Tom," Sharon put in before Hatfield could speak, "remember I also saw them."

The sheriff glared at her in turn, an expression of personal injury on his face.

"Well, they ain't there now," he repeated. "What in blazes become of 'em."

"I'd say," Hatfield supplied, "that somebody must have taken 'em away."

"But in the name of the eternal, why?"

"I don't think the problem is a hard one to figger out," the Lone Wolf replied. "I'd say because they didn't want anybody hereabouts to get a good look at 'em. Mebbe they were scared somebody would recognize 'em and tie 'em up with somebody else."

THE SHERIFF stared at him, his brows wrinkling querulously, but quickly clearing as the notion sank in.

"By gosh, I believe yuh're right!" he exclaimed. He turned to Sharon. "You didn't recognize either of 'em?"

Sharon slowly shook her head. "I really didn't look at them," she replied with a slight shudder. "They were not a pretty sight, sprawled out on the sand and covered with blood. When Mr. Hatfield began examining them, I moved away, and turned my head."

"Reckon that's natural, but I shore wish yuh hadn't been so squeamish," the sheriff remarked gloomily. "Well, women folks are women folks, and there ain't no changin' 'em. Reckon I might as well get back to town."

"I slipped up by not havin' her look over 'em," admitted Hatfield. "Don't for-

get to take that specimen of the gold ore back with yuh."

"All right," grunted the sheriff. "Get me a hunk."

Sharon called the old wrangler who, having cared for the horses, was pottering about nearby.

"Get a specimen of that ore from the cart," she directed. "Grant had the cart put behind the barn, I believe."

The old fellow nodded, and went off on his bow-legs. He was back in a few minutes, empty-handed.

"Ma'am, yuh shore Grant put that cart behind the barn?" he asked.

"Why, yes," Sharon replied. "I saw it done."

"Well," drawled the wrangler, "them oxes is grazin' in the side pasture, but there ain't no cart behind the barn, or nowheres else I can see."

His listeners stared at him, then with one accord hurried to the barn.

The wrangler was not suffering from an attack of loco. The cart was not there, nor anywhere in sight. Sheriff Reeves even looked inside the barn, with barren results.

Hatfield studied the short, firm turf with keen eyes.

"It was here, all right," he said. "Yuh can see the wheel marks plain, where it stood, and farther on, and faint, are the tracks made when it was moved away. Also, there are prints of horses' irons."

The sheriff said something under his breath that certainly was not fit for a lady's ears. Aloud he remarked:

"That load must have been almighty valuable, for 'em to take the chance on sneakin' it away from here."

"Yes," Hatfield agreed quietly. "Chances are, a lot more valuable than we had any notion."

Sharon glanced at him quickly, but Hatfield did not see fit to elaborate on his rather cryptic remark.

"Well," said the sheriff, "I'm headin' back to town, before the hellions wideloop the jail. Ain't nothin' safe hereabouts any more . . . Yes, I'll have somethin' to eat before I go, Sharon, but I can't spend the night. I want to head off Doc McChesney before he starts back down here in the mornin' with his coroner's jury and grave diggers. There ain't nothin' for him to set on, or plant."

They returned to the ranchhouse.

"You take the little room there off the living room," Sharon told Hatfield. "There's no room in the bunkhouse for you right now. Grant sleeps in the room over you, if you should want him for anything."

CHAPTER VIII

Caught Settin'

THE MEAL was eaten, and Sheriff Reeves said goodbye and headed for town.

Hatfield finished a cigarette and rose to his feet.

"I figger to take a little ride, ma'am," he told Sharon.

She glanced at him questioningly, but only nodded. Hatfield went to get the rig on Goldy.

Grant Emory had not yet showed up when the Ranger rode away from the ranchhouse and headed south along the route he and Sharon had taken from the desert's edge the morning before. Shortly after he was out of sight from the ranchhouse, he veered to the east. Soon he reached the Dead Star Trail that curved, lonely and deserted, around the vast bulk of Perdida Peak.

Hatfield rode slowly now, scanning the surface of the trail. Soon his search was rewarded. Plainly indenting the soft surface were the twin wheel marks of the salt cart.

"Figgered they'd head this way," he muttered exultantly. "Now to run the hellions down."

Until the trail veered southwest across the desert, the wheel marks continued on its surface, but not far below the cave in which Hatfield spent the night, they turned to the east. They followed a dim track that hugged the slope of the spur that ran southward from the main body of the mountain.

Mile after mile Hatfield rode. To the west and south was the desert, but a belt of more fertile soil, thickly grown with tall brush, flanked the slope and extended some distance toward the sand. At times the track ran between walls of brush that

were higher than the head of a mounted man.

Hatfield rode carefully, scanning the trail ahead with keen eyes, listening for any significant sound. The nature of the tracks told him that he was traveling considerably faster than the clumsy cart had done.

"They must have holed it up somewheres or emptied it and packed the stuff off," he told himself. "Either way, there's a chance to get a line on where they're headin'."

Another mile was covered, with the brush crowding thickly on either side of the trail. Large patches of grass and occasional bushes growing tall on the track proved that it was little used, although there was evidence that it might have been considerably traveled years before. Hatfield became even more watchful. It was doubtful if the heavily loaded vehicle had been dragged for any great distance, and he was already nearly twenty miles from the ranchhouse.

Suddenly his head jerked to the right. Somewhere in the brush there had sounded a sharp thud. His hands dropped to his guns, and at the same instant a voice rang out on his left:

"Hold it! Yuh're covered!"

The sharp click of a gun-hammer drawn back to full cock emphasized the command.

Hatfield "held it." There was nothing else to do. He was "caught settin'."

"All right," ordered the unseen speaker. "Raise yore hands—slow, and empty. Up high. And keep 'em there."

As Hatfield obeyed, there was a crackling on the brush to his left. Three masked men stepped into view, cocked guns menacing the Ranger. Two were squat, powerful-looking individuals. The third, who did the talking, was taller and of more slender build.

"Don't worry about what's over there to the right," this man said in a jeering voice. "That was just a rock I chucked over there to make yuh look around. Yuh fell for it, all right, just as yuh fell for the cart trick. Looks like old McDowell's extra smart jigger ain't so smart after all—to fall for a trick like that. Figgered yuh wouldn't be able to keep from tryin' to trail the cart, so we just holed up and waited for yuh to come along. Was told to keep out of this country, wasn't yuh? Well, yuh wouldn't listen. Yuh played a plumb dangerous game, and it looks like yuh lost it. Now us fellers will call showdown—and yuh didn't fill yore hand!"

Hatfield said nothing, although he was inwardly seething with rage, more at himself than against the speaker. He had fallen for their trick, all right, had walked into the trap with his eyes wide open. And he knew he had a mighty good chance of paying dearly for his mistake.

MEANWHILE, he was staring with interest at the mask that covered the speaker's face. The lower part of it, where it covered the chin, jutted out in a peculiar fashion.

"Get his hardware, Gulden," the tall man directed. "Get that saddle-gun, too. Careful, now, he's tricky, and lightnin' fast. Don't take no chances. Watch out for that hoss, too. I've a notion he's plumb bad."

One of the squat men approached Hatfield from the rear, reached up gingerly and unbuckled the Ranger's cartridge belts.

He withdrew the Winchester from the saddle-boot and stepped back.

"All right," said the leader. "Parks, go fetch the hosses."

The other squat man pushed his way into the brush, to reappear a few minutes later leading three saddled and bridled horses. At the leader's direction, he and Gulden mounted. They trained their guns on Hatfield while the leader forked his own cayuse.

"Now ride right ahead," he told Hatfield. "Take it easy, and don't try no tricks. That yaller hoss looks fast, but a slug of lead is a heap sight faster. Yuh can put yore hands down now."

With Hatfield riding a few paces in front of his captors, they got under way. For some two miles they followed the track that now wound almost due east around the southern tip of the spur. Suddenly, however, just after rounding a bend, the tall leader called a halt.

Gulden rode forward, turned his horse directly toward the wall of growth that flanked the trail on the left. The growth extended up the slope of the spur in an apparently solid bristle.

Gulden rode straight for the fringe of

chaparral, forced his horse into it, and vanished.

"All right," the leader called to Hatfield. "Foller Gull, and don't forget we're in front and behind yuh."

Hatfield obeyed orders. Goldy snorted protest at entering the apparently solid wall of brush, but obeyed Hatfield's word of command. A crackling and swaying, and he was through what was really but a thin straggle of growth, although a man riding within a yard of it would not have noticed the fact. Ahead stretched a narrow lane cut through the chaparral for a distance of perhaps twenty yards, ending in a dark opening in the swelling rise of the slope.

At the mouth of the opening, Gulden was waiting. Hatfield rode on, the irons of the other two horses clicking on the stones behind him. He pulled to a halt at Gulden's grunted order. Gulden dismounted and vanished into the opening, leading his horse.

A light flared in the darkness. Gulden reappeared, holding aloft a lighted lantern.

"Unfork, and go on in," the leader told Hatfield.

Hatfield obeyed, following Gulden and his bobbing lantern along a low, fairly wide passage. A quick glance or two decided him that the corridor was an old mine tunnel. Behind him he could hear his other two captors scuffing along in his wake, the irons of their led horses ringing on the rock floor.

For perhaps fifty yards the tunnel burrowed into the mountain. Then abruptly it widened into a room hewn in the stone, a room some thirty feet in width. Ahead, about the same distance, he could make out the continuance of the narrower tunnel.

"Hold it," growled Gulden.

He placed the lantern on a rough board table, struck a match and proceeded to light several lamps bracketed into the stone walls. Hatfield gazed about with interest at the owlhoots' hideout.

The room had been roughly fitted up as a living quarters. Several bunks were built along the walls. There were some home-made chairs, a Dutch oven, a number of cooking utensils, some coarse crockery, and a supply of staple provisions on a shelf.

Over to one side was a hitchrack capable of accommodating a dozen horses. To this rack the owlhoots tethered their mounts and Goldy. Then they turned their attention to Hatfield.

The tall man's gaze was speculative, but Gulden's eyes gleamed hotly through the holes in his mask. He stepped up to the Ranger, muttering under his breath.

"Well, reckon yuh don't feel so pert as yuh did the other mornin' when yuh plugged my bunky!" he growled. Barking an oath, he slapped Hatfield across the face, hard, with his open hand.

THE Ranger said nothing. He made no move. He merely looked at Gulden. For a moment the owlhoot met the steady green eyes, then he dropped his own glance, edged back a step, muttering, and slid a hand to his gun butt.

"Hold it!" exclaimed the tall leader. "You know what the Boss's orders were. Yuh want to tangle with *him*? Stop that foolishment and search this jigger."

Still muttering, Gulden obeyed, the man Parks assisting.

They did a thorough job, searching him to the skin, forcing him to remove his boots and carefully examining them inside. Finally they stepped back with baffled remarks.

"He ain't got it," growled Gulden.

The tall man eyed Hatfield, mechanically raising his hand to his masked chin.

"Reckon he ain't," he agreed, "but he knows where it is, yuh can bet on that. We'll fasten him up and hold him for the Boss. The Boss has ways of makin' a jigger talk, even if he don't hanker to."

"I'll make him talk, if yuh give me the chance," rumbled Gulden. "I'd shore like to have the chance. I'm in favor of cashin' him in right now. It's the safest thing to do."

"Mebbe so," admitted the leader, "but orders is orders. Herd him back into the hole and we'll fasten him up."

He stepped to the little heap of Hatfield's belongings on the table beside his holstered guns, picked up the tobacco and matches and thrust them at the Ranger.

"Here," he grunted. "Reckon yuh can stand a smoke while yuh're waitin'. I wouldn't take that away from a feller that ain't got much time, even if he is a blasted Ranger."

For the first time since his capture, Hatfield spoke.

"Much obliged, feller," he said. "mebbe I'll remember it some time."

"Reckon not," the other man replied significantly. "Not after tonight. Never mind yore boots. Yuh won't need boots where you're goin'."

They herded the Ranger into the continuance of the tunnel, Gulden bearing the lantern. For some sixty paces the tunnel ran straight, with unbroken walls, then an opening yawned on the left. Into this Hatfield was forced. Gulden held the lantern high, and Hatfield's breath caught in his throat.

The room, about ten yards square, had evidently been used as a storehouse of sorts. Rusty picks and shovels and bars of curious design were scattered about. But there were also other things.

Some six feet out from the far wall was a row of thick iron rods set into the rock floor and the rock ceiling to form uprights about three feet apart. The row continued around the far end wall also, Hatfield noted. To these uprights were secured stout chains riveted to the iron. The chains ended in ponderous leg irons, and nearly all of the iron cuffs were locked about what had once been a human ankle, but now was fleshless bone.

Some lying prone, some hunched over with knees drawn up to the bony chins were the pitiful victims. In most cases the corpses had dried and dessicated in the hot, dry air, until instead of skeletons, they had become grotesque mummies with parchment skin drawn tight over the bones beneath, eyeless sockets staring, shriveled lips drawn back from the teeth in grotesque grins. From some of the skulls still hung lank black hair.

The black hair, the darkness of the skin and the prominence of the cheek-bones identified the dead to Hatfield. They had been, he knew, Indians, doubtless the slaves held captive by the old Spaniards and forced to work the mine. Here they were kept locked up at night. For some reason they had been abandoned by their heartless captors to die a slow and torturous death by thirst and starvation.

Doubtless a hundred years, and perhaps much more, had passed since they had sat down to their last long sleep in the black dark.

CHAPTER IX

The Lone Wolf Scores

GULDEN held the lantern high, and gave an evil chuckle.

"Yuh'll have company while yuh're waitin' for the Boss," he said. "And I reckon these other hellions will have company while *they're* waitin' for Judgment Day. Come over here!"

While the other two men stood alert and watchful, Gulden picked up one of the clanking leg irons that showed signs of recent oiling and use, clamped it around Hatfield's ankle and locked it with a key he took from his pocket.

"You ain't the first one this has been used on," he remarked, gesturing to a corner where something lay huddled. "Over there is another jigger what got in the Boss' way—or what's left of him. He didn't last long. He'd already been plugged—but you look purty husky. Reckon yuh'll be able to last quite a spell, even though yuh're liable to wish yuh couldn't. A feller gets thirsty mighty fast in here."

The tall man gave an impatient exclamation. "Cut the big medicine, Gul, and come along," he ordered. "Yuh're stayin' here in the hangout. Me and Parks are goin' to ride to meet the Boss. He'll be waitin' over to the forks to find out if we dropped the noose on this jigger before he decides whether to come over here or ride on south."

They trooped out together, taking the lantern with them. Hatfield sat down in the dark, his chain clanking unpleasantly, fished out his tobacco and matches, and rolled a cigarette. For some minutes he smoked, relishing the quieting effect of the tobacco, and thinking hard. He knew he was on a tough spot, and that his chances of getting off it were scant.

"Those hellions would never let me get out of here alive, after I've once seen their hole-up," he told himself. "Reckon what they was lookin' for was that map. Lucky I stowed it away in my belt. That thing must be mighty important. Most likely they were lookin' for it when they ransacked the mine office last night. They

found the hunk of ore and took it along with 'em.

"Reckon they figgered if I left the ore with Hodges, I would have left the map with him also. When they didn't find it, they decided I must have it. Now they don't know where it is, but are determined to find out. If I don't work out somethin' in a hurry, it'll be all over with me when the Boss, whoever in blazes he is, gets here. And I've got a notion I haven't got much time."

Pinching out his cigarette butt, he examined his fetters. The iron cuff fitted snugly about his leg just above the ankle bone. The chain, while rusty, was evidently firm enough. A tentative tug or two convinced him it was far beyond his strength to break it. It was securely riveted to the upright bar and the bar was set deep in the stone of floor and ceiling.

He could hear Gulden banging about in the other room. Soon the smell of frying bacon and boiling coffee drifted into his prison. Gulden was evidently preparing a meal. After a while he quieted down save for an occasional rattle of knife and fork. Then a long silence ensued.

Hatfield rolled another cigarette. After lighting it, he held the burning match aloft and gazed about. The chain that held him, he saw, was about six feet in length, of stout links welded together. His eyes roved over the motionless mummies of the dead Indians. They centered on the scattering of picks and shovels and bars.

One stout bar lay not far off. He felt he could reach it by stretching out on the floor. It would make an admirable weapon, were he free to use it. But it was useless so long as he was chained to the upright rod. The last flicker of the match showed the next rod in the row about three feet distant. Its image remained fixed on his retina for a moment after the light went out.

Suddenly he uttered a hoarse exclamation, under his breath. That upright rod less than three feet distant—the chain, a good six feet in length, the stout iron bar within reach. His heart beat wildly with renewed hope as he listened intently for any sound of movement in the outer room.

ALL WAS silent. Perhaps Gulden slept. Tingling with impatience and apprehension as the Ranger was, he decided to wait a little longer before putting the plan that had suddenly formulated in his brain into action. He was almost certain to make some noise. If Gulden heard, he might get suspicious and come to investigate.

Slowly the minutes dragged past, and the silence continued. Hatfield could stand it no longer. He resolved to take the chance. Gently he moved the full length of his chain in the direction of the iron bar. He stretched out prone on the floor, groped about with fingers. Finally his hand touched the rough, rounded surface of the bar.

He gripped it, drew it to him. Then he got stealthily to his feet, careful to avoid clanking the chain. He gathered it up in his hands, stepped to the upright rod only a few feet distant. Carefully he walked around the rod, winding the chain about the stout upright. The length between the rod and the one to which it was riveted hung slightly slack.

Hatfield continued to walk about the rod, winding the chain around it, carefully stepping over the loosely hanging section between the two uprights. Finally he had nearly a dozen turns around the second rod. He stepped toward the first rod, drawing taut the end of the chain secured to the leg iron. Then he took a loop in the slack between the two rods, thrust the iron bar into the loop and twisted.

This gave him a terrific leverage. The section of chain between the two rods tightened and hummed. Hatfield twisted the bar still more. In his strained position it was awkward to handle. The veins stood out on his forehead like cords. Sweat poured down his face.

Great back and arm muscles writhed and bulged under his thin shirt, threatening to rip the fabric. He shook as with ague. The chain hummed, the uprights creaked and groaned.

Suddenly there was a sharp snap. The bar slipped in Hatfield's grip as the tension on it eased. A link had parted.

Hatfield put more pressure on the bar, twisting with every atom of his strength. He felt the broken link stretch apart. Not daring to let the loose ends of the chain clatter on the rock floor, he eased off on the bar, ran trembling fingers along the chain until he found the snapped link.

With a gasp of relief he realized the opening was wide enough to ease the companion link through.

He laid down the bar and twisted the link with his fingers. The chain parted. He eased one end to the floor, deftly unwound the other length from about the upright. He was free! And there was no sound from Gulden!

He looped up the loose chain and wound it about his leg, knotting it as securely as possible, so it would not drag clanking on the floor when he moved. Then he picked up the bar that had been his salvation, paused a minute to catch his breath, and stole silently out of the prison chamber and along the tunnel on stockinged feet. He reached the outer room, peered cautiously into its lighter interior.

Gulden sat at the table, his back to the inner tunnel mouth, his chin sunk on his breast. He was undoubtedly drowsing. Hatfield stole out of the tunnel and entered the chamber, the bar gripped and ready. He raised it aloft.

And at that instant the length of chain looped around his leg slipped, fell to the floor with a clanking clatter.

Gulden leaped to his feet, whirled about, hand streaking to his gun. Hatfield leaped forward and struck.

The blow missed Gulden's arm, but it struck his drawn gun squarely, sending it spinning across the room. Hatfield whirled up the bar for a second blow.

Gulden dived under the blow with catlike swiftness. The bar whizzed harmlessly over his head. Hatfield's wrist crashed onto Gulden's shoulder. The force of the contact opened his fingers, the bar clanged to the floor. Before he could recover, Gulden's huge reaching hands fastened on his throat in a viselike grip. Backward and forward the two men reeled in a silent death grapple.

Gulden, though nearly a foot shorter than the tall Ranger, was many pounds heavier, and he seemed to be made of steel wires. Hatfield battered at his head with his fists, but Gulden buried his face against the Ranger's chest and grimly held on.

HATFIELD tore at the man's corded wrists but could not loosen the terrible grasp of his thick fingers. His lungs were bursting for want of air, his head was spinning. There seemed to be a red-hot iron band tightening and tightening about his chest. Before his bulging eyes formed a thin, oval-tinted mist. His strength was going. And still Gulden tightened his awful grip.

With the strength of desperation, Hatfield hurled himself backward. He struck the stone floor with a bone-wracking crash. At the same time he jerked down on Gulden's wrists with every ounce of force in him, driving his leg, stiff as an iron rod, upward.

The throttling fingers tore free from his throat. Gulden's body shot into the air. He howled with pain as he turned a complete somersault and hurtled downward, landing on his head, his body stretched out at an angle.

There was the thud of Gulden's skull on the stone, a sharp crack, then a queer, spasmodic tattoo of boot heels pounding the rock floor.

Hatfield staggered to his feet, gulping in great draughts of life-giving air. Reeling and swaying, he stared at Gulden, who lay on his stomach, his head twisted about at a horrid angle, so that his distorted face glared with fixed eyes over his right shoulder.

"Busted his neck when he landed!" Hatfield muttered between gasps for breath.

A deadly nausea swept over him. He lurched to the wall and leaned against it, his head spinning, red flashes storming before his eyes, his muscles turning to water. For minutes he sagged against the stone, until his brain cleared a little, his strength began to come back. Finally he straightened up, stood rocking on his feet a moment, then staggered to the table.

Retrieving his gun belts from where they lay, he buckled them on. He made sure that his long Colts were fully loaded and in perfect working condition. Then he turned Gulden over on his back, fumbled his pockets until he found the key to the leg iron and unlocked the cuff. The chain rattled to the floor. Painfully he drew on his boots, recovered his possessions from the table and stowed them away.

Somebody had removed Goldy's rig, which lay nearby. Hatfield cinched with trembling fingers, located his Winchester and slid it into the saddle boot. The urgent necessity now was to get away

before the Boss and his men arrived at the mine. Weak and shaken as he was, Hatfield knew he was in no shape for a desperate battle against overwhelming odds.

He paused just long enough to turn out Gulden's pockets. He discovered nothing of any significance. Leading Goldy, he headed for the outer air. Getting into the saddle was considerable of a chore, but with the good horse between his thighs, he felt much better.

Full dark had long since fallen and the brush-flanked lane was black as pitch, but Hatfield sent Goldy along it at a good pace. Without slacking speed the sorrel crashed through the thin fringe of growth. Hatfield dimly saw the shapes of a group of horsemen directly in front of him and heading in his direction.

Somebody gave a yelp of alarm. Hatfield's voice rang out like a golden bugle call:

"Trail, Goldy! Trail!"

CHAPTER X

Thieves Fall Out

RAPID hoofs drummed the ground as the great sorrel shot forward. And over his tossing head, Hatfield's guns blazed and thundered.

Yells of alarm split the air, and a howl of pain. Goldy struck one horse shoulder to shoulder and sent it sprawling to the ground. Hatfield's flailing gun-barrel crunched against bone. Then they were through the whirling, demoralized tangle and flashing along the trail. Guns boomed behind them, lead whined past, but in seconds they were around the bend and out of range.

Swaying easily to the motion of the racing sorrel, Hatfield ejected the spent shells from his guns and replaced them with fresh cartridges. He chuckled as he glanced over his shoulder. Nobody was in sight, and swiftly he was around a second turn in the trail.

Hatfield had little fear of pursuit now, even if it were attempted. He had full confidence in Goldy's great speed and endurance. But nevertheless he was taking no chances. He did not slacken the sorrel's pace until he reached the point where the old track joined the Dead Star Trail, miles distant. . . .

Meanwhile there was a wrathful gathering in the mine tunnel beneath the slope. The outlaws had removed their masks and were grouped around Gulden's dead body. One was bleeding from an ugly bullet gash in his cheek. Another had a deep cut in his scalp, a memento of the hardness of Hatfield's gun-barrel.

Only one man had not uncovered his face. He was a tall, broad man who paced up and down the room with long, smooth strides.

The tall, slender man who had led the Ranger's captors was revealed as Walsh Knox, the Shanghai M foreman. His eyes were glinting with anger, his aggressive tuft of beard was bristling forward on his prominent chin.

"What I'd like to know," he was saying, "is how did that hellion bust this chain?"

[*Turn page*]

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WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC

"I don't know," replied the masked man, "unless you carelessly overlooked a weak link."

"Weak link, huh?" barked Knox. "Here's the link that was busted. The break's clean across and plumb fresh. That chain would have held a two-thousand-pound beef. But he busted it!"

"Busted Gulden's neck, too," muttered one of the group around the body. "I wouldn't have believed there was a man livin' who could do that. Gulden was a bull. There's folks that say that seven-foot hellion ain't human. I'm beginnin' to think mebbe they're right."

His companions glanced nervously at the speaker. The masked man gave a derisive snort.

"He's human all right," he retorted. "He's smart, that's all, too smart for you thick-heads. I'll take over the chore of looking after him next time, and you'll see whether he's human. You're sure he didn't have that map, Knox?"

"Plumb shore," the foreman replied. "We gave him a thorough combin', and found nothin'. He shore didn't have it on him."

"I've a notion where it is," the masked man growled. "I'll attend to that later. What I can't undertsand is why you didn't first thing get hold of that map the other morning when you had the chance. You knew well enough that doublecrossing driver had it on him."

Knox flushed, but met the hard eyes. "I reckon we was just too anxious to see what was in the cart," he replied. "We didn't figger on bein' interrupted like we was."

"Yes, you would do that," the tall broad man said bitterly. "Grab at a peso and let a fortune slip through your fingers. I don't know what's the matter with you of late. Tonight makes three chores you've bungled one after another. You didn't used to be like this."

"Uh-huh, and mebbe I was never up against anythin' like I been of late," growled Knox. "I wish I'd done for that big hellion while I had the chance. I won't feel safe so long as he's amblin' around loose. I figger yuh made a mistake by tryin' to keep him out of this country in the first place. Yuh'd oughta known he wouldn't scare."

"I never figured he'd scare," the Boss replied quietly. "I wrote that note to start him on a cold trail, to have him looking for the sort of person who would write that kind of a note. And I believe it worked."

"Mebbe," Knox agreed doubtfully. "But he's been gettin' too plumb close for comfort. But you ain't never fell down on anythin' yet, and I don't reckon yuh will this time, no matter how loco things look."

"I figger the whole business is just foolishment," growled one of the listening group. "We're doin' purty well as it is. Why go sashayin' off after somethin' that may never amount to anythin' anyhow?"

THE masked man whirled on him like a cat. His long arm shot out, his hand fastened on the speaker's throat, and lifted him clear off his feet. With a strangled yell, the man went for his gun. Fingers like rods of steel clamped his wrist. He croaked with agony as his wrist bones ground together.

The gun thudded to the floor. He clutched at the masked man's wrist with his free hand, but was powerless to free his throat from that throttling grip. His tongue protruded, his terror-glazed eyes bulged from his head as the grip tightened.

The masked man spoke, his voice quiet, unruffled:

"I should squeeze just a little harder. But I won't, not this time. You're getting one more chance, and the last. There won't be a second one for anybody else who questions my orders or my judgment. That goes for all of you."

He loosened his grasp suddenly. The victim fell to the floor, groaning and retching. The masked man swept the group with his steady eyes. Under that baleful regard, the owlhoots shifted their feet, glanced uneasily away.

The masked man spoke again.

"All right now, you fellows scatter out of here. You've still got a chore to do tonight. Pack Gulden along with you. We don't want Tom Reeves to find him if he comes snooping around here, as he's liable to do as soon as that big hellion gets word to him of what happened. Knox, you're heading back to the Shanghai M."

"It's a long ride, after all I've done today," Knox grumbled.

"I know it is," the Boss replied, adding

significantly, "but remember you're working for a cripple, and you have all the work of the spread on your hands. Tomorrow the other cowmen of the valley will be dropping in to arrange details of the roundup next week. It would look funny if you weren't on the job, especially as you are about certain to be chosen roundup boss. We're taking no chances on anything with that infernal Ranger mavericking around."

Knox growled an oath but nodded agreement. . . . .

Ranchhouse and bunkhouse were both dark when Hatfield reached the Lazy R headquarters. He stabled his horse, entered the house by way of the front door, which was unlocked, and gained his room without waking anybody. He undressed and stretched out wearily on his bed.

Although he was dead tired, he did not immediately go to sleep. For nearly an hour he lay, thinking hard. He was just about to close his eyes when he heard the front door open. Steps crossed the outer room and ascended the stairs. They died away for a moment, then resumed on the floor over Hatfield's head. He lay listening until the sound ceased. Then he turned over and closed his eyes.

"Looks like Senor Emory sort of made a night of it," he told the darkness, as he drifted off to sleep.

Hatfield awakened early. He found himself stiff and sore, and his throat was somewhat swollen, but he felt in fairly good shape despite the hectic happenings of the previous night. Before leaving his room, he took the mysterious map from his secret belt pocket and eyed it with appreciation.

"I've a notion this thing is goin' to be sort of valuable to me," he mused. "Those sidewinders seem to set a heap of store by it, and I've a feelin' they won't try to drygulch me from ambush or anything like that till they get some idea of what I did with it. But if they ever get their hands on me again—gentlemen, hush!"

Hatfield had breakfast with Sharon, Grant Emory, and the hands in the big dining room. The foreman had dark circles under his eyes and seemed somewhat preoccupied, but he was cheerful enough.

He was not cheerful a couple of hours later, however, when a young cowboy rode a lathered horse to the veranda where Emory sat familiarizing Hatfield with the general layout of the Lazy R spread. Emory descended the steps in answer to the puncher's call, and listened to what he had to say. When he returned, his face was angry and worried.

"What's the matter, Grant?" asked Sharon, who had come out at the sound of hoofbeats.

"They got another bunch last night, that's what," Emory replied wrathfully. "More'n a hundred fat beefs from the southwest pasture."

SHARON looked grave and worried.

"Grant," she said, "we can't stand much more of this with the obligations we have to meet."

"I know we can't," Emory returned gloomily, "but what in blazes to do? They hit here, they hit there, and are gone like shadows into a dark canyon. We can't set a guard on every beef that's amblin' the range."

"How about guarding the lower end of the Dead Star Trail?" Sharon suggested.

"Tom Reeves tried that," Emory grunted. "He spent three nights down there with a bunch of deputies. Hardly anybody knowed anythin' about it. And what happened? While he was there watchin', we lost a bunch, and so did the Scab Eight. And that infernal trail is supposed to be the only way across the desert to the River."

"Could they head across the hills to the west and circle south?" Hatfield asked.

"Only up to the north," Emory replied. "To do that they'd have to drive across the Forked S, the Wallop, and the Shanghai M. They could never make it from our spread or the Scab Eight durin' the dark hours. If only the Shanghai M and the Fiddle-Back, up to the north, was losin' cows, that might explain it, but everybody's been losin' 'em. Nope, they must go south."

"Why can't the desert be crossed except by way of the Dead Star Trail?"

"Faults—gulches—buttes. A hoss can't hardly make it any place except by the trail, let alone a bunch of beefs in a hurry. Over west of the west range, there's nothin' to it. Easy goin' all the way south, but there's no gettin' across them hills with cows, except up north where the pass is.

And no way at all across the Perdida Range, or across the desert southeast of it."

Hatfield nodded, his eyes thoughtful, and relapsed into silence.

"Well, right now we've got other things to do," Emory remarked. "Hatfield, you might as well ride with me to the Fiddle-Back and the Shanghai M. Yuh can meet some folks that way. I want to talk over the roundup next week with Ralph Adams, who owns the Fiddle-Back, and with Talbot Morrow, over to the Shanghai M."

He and Hatfield saddled up and rode north. First they visited the Fiddle-Back. Adams, the owner, proved to be a crusty old-timer with a vivid vocabulary of unusual profanity. Hatfield liked him immediately. After discussing details with Adams, they rode west across the range to the Shanghai M *casa*.

CHAPTER XI

Death on the Range

KNOX, the foreman, was on the veranda when Hatfield and Emory rode up to the ranchhouse. He gave them a coolly impersonal greeting, his lips twisting in a sneer as he spoke to Emory. He raised a slender hand and tugged at his chin tuft as Hatfield was introduced to him.

"Take a load off yore feet," he invited. "The Boss will be right out."

Emory took a chair. Hatfield sat down on the edge of the porch, his long legs dangling, and leaned back comfortably against a post.

Knox stuck his head in the door and called an order. A moment later there was a sound of boots pounding the floor. Two husky punchers appeared, packing a chair in which was seated Talbot Morrow, a blanket resting across his knees. The cowboys placed the chair on the veranda and retired.

Morrow gave Hatfield a steady look from his blue eyes and acknowledged his introduction in a deep and not unpleasant voice. He shook hands with a firm grip. Hatfield resumed his seat on the edge of the porch and listened while Emory and the Shanghai M owner discussed with Knox the details of the coming roundup.

Suddenly his gaze fixed on Morrow's well-polished boots that rested supinely on the floor, held for an instant, then glanced away. He fished out the "makin's" and rolled a cigarette, his black brows drawing together until the concentration furrow was deep between them.

Details of the coming roundup fully discussed, Hatfield and Emory took their departure.

By hard riding, they reached the Lazy R in time for a late supper. After eating, while Emory discussed the roundup with Sharon in the living room, Hatfield strolled out for a look at the night.

When he mounted the veranda steps, some time later, he paused for a moment. Through the open window he could view the interior of the living room. Sharon had evidently gone upstairs. Grant Emory was in the act of taking a book from the shelf of technical works. He sat down, opened the book, and became absorbed in its contents.

When Hatfield entered the room, Emory was so intent on his reading that he merely glanced up in the detached way of a man whose train of thought has been broken. He waved his hand in greeting and immediately dropped his eyes to the printed page.

Hatfield passed to his own room, his face thoughtful.

The following day Hatfield rode the range with Emory and the Lazy R punchers, getting the lowdown on the holdings. That evening, while Emory was busy with some chores, Jim Hatfield sat in the living room and talked with Sharon. In the course of the conversation, the girl made some remark concerning her father.

"Yuh say yore dad died not long ago?" Hatfield asked.

"Yes," she quietly replied, but with bitterness in her soft voice. "A little more than three months ago he—was killed."

"Killed?"

"Yes."

"Any notion who killed him?"

"I'm sure I saw the man who did it," Sharon replied slowly, "but nobody has seen him since."

"How was that?"

"Dad rode home from town one night,"

the girl told him. "With him was a man he introduced to me as Burt Ander, a prospector. He was an old man with gray hair and a great gray beard. He was dressed roughly, his clothes patched and faded. He and Dad sat talking until late at night. I don't know what about. Early the next morning they rode off together, went across the range. Dad told me he would be back before dark.

"When night came he wasn't back, and he wasn't back the next morning. Naturally the boys went looking for him. They found his body over on the west range, beside a spring. He had been shot in the back of the head. The sheriff hunted for the prospector, but did not find him. Nobody has seen him or heard anything of him."

"Was your dad robbed?"

Sharon shook her head. "No, he was not. What money he carried was still in his pocket, as was his watch. It was very sad, and very strange. Dad never had an enemy that anybody ever heard of. Why that prospector should have killed him is beyond understanding. In fact, of late I have wondered if it could possibly have been an accident. Such things have happened, you know. Perhaps the prospector accidentally shot him, and became frightened and ran away."

"Could be," Hatfield admitted.

AT THAT moment Emory appeared. He held a long sheet of paper upon which words and figures were scrawled in a crude schoolboy hand.

"Sharon," he said, "I've been checkin' the stores we got. There's a heap of stuff we're goin' to need for next week. I've made out a list. I've got a hatful of chores to do tomorrow, so I wonder if you couldn't ride up to town and have Vanstaver, the storekeeper, send this stuff down to us."

"Of course I will, Grant," Sharon said at once. "I'll start early."

Emory nodded, seemed to hesitate. "Hatfield," he said at length, "would you mind ridin' along with her? I got a funny feelin' of late about havin' her ride the range alone, because of what all's been happenin' hereabouts of late, I reckon. Mebbe I'm loco, but just the same I can't help feelin' that way."

"Be glad to," Hatfield agreed instantly. "Funny things appear to be goin' on, all right. I figger yuh got a good notion."

Hatfield and Sharon headed for town the following morning. The air was cool and crisp, with the first touch of autumn. Frost gleamed on the grass heads, catching the sunlight in a jeweled sheen. Already the long slopes of the hills were touched with gold and scarlet, and leaves like flecks of flame floated down as a gentle wind stirred the branches.

Overhead the Texas sky was deeply blue, but a mystic purple haze shrouded the crests of the mountains and misted the thin fine line of the horizon. Nature was weaving a shroud for the dying year, and brightening its somber gray with the rainbowed promise of new birth when the sunlight would once more turn from white to gold and the tender green of spring would tip the leaden monotone of the leafless branches.

Everywhere was the beauty of approaching death and decay, which is as fair to the seeing eye and the understanding heart as is the glory of up-springing life.

The man and the girl who rode together felt its truth and were silent—silent with the appreciation of the loveliness all about them. More than once the girl glanced a trifle wistfully at the sternly handsome profile of the man who rode beside her. But suddenly her red lips quirked at the corners and her blue eyes danced with laughter.

Hatfield abruptly came out of his preoccupation.

"What you laughing at, Sharon?" he asked wonderingly.

"I was just thinking, Jim," she replied, using his given name for the first time, "of the philosopher who searched the world over for the jewel of happiness, looking afar, dreaming dreams of the impossible, ever seeking, only to find when, old and disillusioned, he wandered home once more, that all the time it had lain in plain view by his own doorstep."

Hatfield smiled down at her from his great height, and his strangely colored eyes were all kindness.

"Too many folks never learn that lesson, Sharon," he said. "It's not often that anyone as young as you even senses it. I figger yuh're lucky."

"Yes," she replied softly, "but just the

same, it's something to have dreamed!"

When they arrived at town, Sharon immediately contacted Vanstaver, the keeper of the general store. The chores she had to do would occupy her the rest of the day.

Hatfield dropped in for a talk with Sheriff Reeves. He found old Tom morose and irritable. The lawman swore gloomily upon hearing of the widelooped cattle, and exclaimed in astonishment and wrath when Hatfield recounted his experience in the old mine tunnel.

"Reckon I'd better head down there and look the place over?" he asked.

Hatfield shook his head. "Don't see as there would be any sense to it," he replied. "Takin a sixty-mile ride for nothin'. They shore cleared out of there pronto, and took what was left of Gulden with 'em. Figger yuh wouldn't find anything when yuh got there."

The sheriff knit his brows. "I sort of recollect seein' a jigger of that hellion's general description hangin' around town of late," he remarked. "But we get a lot of mavericks here from time to time, so I reckon it don't mean much." A sudden thought seemed to strike him. "By the way, feller, where did you come from, and what brought yuh to this section?"

HATFIELD'S rather wide mouth quirked at the corners. He did not immediately reply, but sat studying the old peace officer's lined face for moments. He had already decided that Reeves was honest and trustworthy, although not too greatly supplied with intelligence. He felt also that Reeves could be depended upon to keep his mouth shut.

Abruptly he arrived at a decision. His hand dropped to the secret pocket in his broad leather belt. A moment later he laid something on the table between them.

Sheriff Reeves stared at the object, his jaw sagging. It was a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle, the feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers!

"Good gosh!" the sheriff exploded. "Yuh're a Ranger! McDowell sent yuh over here?" Suddenly his eyes blazed. He stared at Hatfield. "And, by gosh, I know yuh!" he exclaimed. "I got yuh placed now. You're the Lone Wolf!"

"Been called that," Hatfield admitted.

Sheriff Reeves stared, almost in awe, at the man whose exploits were fast becoming legend throughout the Southwest.

"The Lone Wolf!" he repeated. "Settin' right here in my office! Well, if this don't take the hide off a double-branded beef!"

Hatfield chuckled, but immediately became grave. "Yes," he said, "Captain McDowell sent me over here, to try and get a line on Quantrell, but so far it's been principally Quantrell gettin' a line on me. He's a salty proposition, with brains."

"Uh-huh, whoever he is, he's got plenty of wrinkles on his horns," the sheriff agreed. "Got any kind of a lead on him?"

"I have a notion," Hatfield replied slowly, "but I haven't much to go on, yet. By the way, there seems to be bad blood between Grant Emory and Knox, the Shanghai M foreman. How come?"

"That's a funny thing," the sheriff said reflectively. "When Knox showed up here with Tal Morrow, about six months back, him and Emory got real friendly. Were pardin' around together a heap. Reckon they found considerable in common. Emory used to be a wild sort of young hellion. Gambled a heap, drank considerable. Flashy temper, lightnin' fast with his gun hand.

"That was before Weston Remington got cashed in and Emory took over at the Lazy R. Since then he's been mighty steady. Responsibility, I reckon. About that time he seemed to break with Knox. Uh-huh, they used to be plumb thick, but now they go out of the way to show they ain't got no use for each other."

"Go out of the way to show it?" Hatfield repeated thoughtfully.

"Uh-huh, they're plumb on the prod against each other. Wouldn't be surprised if they had a showdown some time. They're both salty propositions."

"Knox came here with Morrow, I believe yuh said?"

"That's right. He was Morrow's foreman over in Arizona. Morrow owned a spread over there. He sold out and came to take over the Shanghai M, which is the biggest and best outfit in the valley, when his dad passed in his chips. Pity about him gettin' crippled up. He always was a big, up-standin' fine-lookin' feller. I recollect him when he left here. Wasn't but a boy in them days, but was already plenty hefty. Wanted to see the world, he said.

"Roamed around considerable, I take it.

Then he sort of settled down in Arizona. Wrote to his dad regular. I recollect when the word come, a couple years back, that he'd got shot and crippled. The news plumb broke up old Arn Morrow. He wanted Tal to come home then, but Tal decided to head on over west. An independent sort of cuss. Of course when his dad took the Big Jump, he come back to look after the property here, which was likely a heap sight more valuable than his holdin's in Arizona."

Hatfield, who had listened intently to the sheriff's story, nodded.

"Reeves," he said abruptly, "there's no telegraph office here, I take it?"

"Nope. One at Dorantes, the railroad town. Why?"

"I want to send a message to McDowell," Hatfield replied. "Give me a pen and paper and I'll write it out now. I want you to see it. I'll have the answer come addressed to you."

Reeves produced pen and paper. Hatfield wrote a carefully worded message to the Ranger Captain. Reeves read it and his eyes glowed.

"By gosh, yuh may have somethin' there!" he exclaimed. "I've had a funny notion or two about that galoot myself. As I said before, he's a salty proposition."

Hatfield smiled, and changed the subject. "Now about gettin' to Dorantes," he suggested.

"It's a forty-mile ride, mebbe a little more," the sheriff said. "Yuh take the road east till yuh hit the Dead Star Trail at the salt flats. It's nearly twenty miles to the flats, and another twenty miles or so across the flats and the hills to the north. Keep your eyes skinned for Quantrell and his bunch," he added, half jokingly. "They've raised ructions on that trail."

"Some time the ructions they raise will fall back on top of them," Hatfield predicted grimly.

CHAPTER XII

The Dead World

BIDDING Reeves tell Sharon he had a chore to do and would see her in the morning, Hatfield rode east out of Gavilan. Across the rangeland the going was easy and he made good time, but it was different when he reached the flats.

Here was a land of desolation and decay, the blinding surface of the salt stretching for miles, with the Dead Star Trail writhing like a tortured snake across the blasted salt. The heat was terrific, and the fine powder stirred by blasts of a sultry wind parched Hatfield's lips and caused his eyes to smart unbearably.

On all sides, weird looking dunes started up, misty and unreal in the distance, advancing, retreating, seeming to fade away and vanish, only to reappear with startling distinctness through the vagaries of refracted light.

The surface of the trail was firm enough, although at times deeply silted by the sifting salt.

But it was different away from its tortuous course. The place was a veritable plain of the white shadow of death. The surface was covered with little dimples and cones that made walking almost impossible, with here and there perfectly smooth reaches glistening like powdered ice.

Once, moved to examine closer a strikingly shaped dune, Hatfield sent Goldy out onto such a surface. Almost instantly the surface trembled and heaved under the horse's weight. Behind him he left tracks just as plainly in the salt as if they had been imprinted in snow. The substance that looked so utterly dry was wet and sticky.

One hoof broke through the shallow crust. Hatfield jerked Goldy sharply back. Through the hoof break oozed water that looked like acid. Reining the sorrel carefully about, he returned to the trail, which he did not leave again.

His glance swept the scene of stark desolation with understanding. The grip of his imagination rolled back the ages and he visioned what this ominous terrain once had been. Here between the battlements of the hills that were its shores, had heaved and tossed a shallow lake. Strange and mighty monsters, scaled and tailed, had prowled and fed and fought amid the reeds under a blazing reddish sun. Other monsters had soared over the dark water on webbed, membranous wings, snapping their teeth-filled, rat-trap beaks at insects whizzing past in the hot,

steamy air.

The growth that fringed the lake was unbelievably luxuriant in its lush green, but the hills beyond were naked, heat-scorched rock. It was a raw, unfinished, terrible and forbidding landscape of Earth's youngness.

In Hatfield's ears rang an agonized scream as the greater dragon pinned the lesser amid the slime. Before his eyes floated glimpses of the endless, numberless tragedies that accompanied progressing life in the slow climb up the ladder of the eons. Life that changed and developed as the mountains heaved and sank, and the waters of the vast lake dried to stagnant pools that deposited their silt upon its desiccated bed.

While the hills eroded, the naked stone became surfaced with fertile earth. The green that had been the border of the ancient lake wrapped the hills instead in its emerald mantle to form a jeweled setting for the white plain of death across which the Ranger rode.

"And the day will come again when all this will be changed once more," he mused. "When the hills will have worn down to nothin' under the ceaseless caress of the fingers of Time, when this which looks like eternal death will once more bud and bloom with new life."

The thought was inspiring amid the forbidding scene, and he faced the soaring hills that swiftly drew nearer, with a smile.

Nevertheless he heaved a sigh of relief when he finally left the flats and began climbing the slopes. Not that the road through the hills did not leave much to be desired. It was still the Dead Star Trail, and the Dead Star Trail seemed to always seek out the most sinister terrain for its endless windings.

Soon Hatfield found himself riding along the edge of a beetling precipice that dropped hundreds of feet to a canyon floor, with a rugged cliff forming the inner wall of the trail. The turns were frequent and sharp, the rise very steep.

HE RAISED his head suddenly as a clicking of hoofs and a rumbling sounded somewhere ahead. Then a bulky stage-coach, rocking and swaying in its cradle of springs, lurched around a turn and bore down upon him.

As Hatfield reined aside to let the equipage pass, he noted that two men with ready rifles paced their horses on either side of the coach. They favored Hatfield with hard, searching glances as they passed, but nodded a greeting. Then a turn farther down the trail hid them from view.

"Must be a pay roll or a gold shipment in that coach," the Ranger mused as he continued on his way. "Those jiggers shore look ready for trouble."

Half an hour later he uttered a sharp exclamation. The trail ahead seemed abruptly to leap off into space. As he drew nearer, however, he saw that it made an almost right-angled turn around a bulge of cliff.

Goldy took the turn on gingerly placed hoofs. Hatfield glanced into the dark depths almost beneath his elbow and shook his head.

"Anything takin' this bend at faster'n a walk, comin' down hill, wouldn't stop till it hit the bottom of the canyon in splinters," he told the sorrel, with conviction.

For a little over a mile more he rode without mishap. The turns were still frequent, but shallower, easier to negotiate. Not far to the front the crest of a rise stood out with knife-edge sharpness against the skyline. Goldy was toiling up the rise when Hatfield was startled by a stutter of shots somewhere beyond the crest.

While he was wondering what they could mean, there was a pounding of hoofs, a roaring of wheels, and a ponderous freight wagon drawn by four maddened horses swept over the ridge and thundered down the trail. In a fleeting glimpse before he whirled Goldy, Hatfield saw that the driver's seat was unoccupied, and that over the back of the seat a man's leg, around which the reins were wrapped, stuck stiffly into the air.

For the moment Hatfield did not have time to look for more. He was too busy putting some distance between himself and the juggernaut crashing toward him. But as Goldy easily held his own in the race, the Ranger turned in his saddle and stared back with narrowing eyes.

"That jigger who toppled off the seat may not be dead," he told the sorrel, "but he shore will be if that contraption tries to round the hairpin turn down below without slowin' up. Feller, I reckon we got to

try and do somethin' about it. Hug that cliff, now, and we'll see what's what. We're liable to get squashed against the rock, but we got to take the chance."

He slowed the sorrel's pace. The wagon quickly gained. As it drew near, Hatfield estimated its rate of speed and quickened Goldy's gait correspondingly. Soon the tossing heads of the run-away team were level with the sorrel's flank.

As Hatfield had surmised they would, the wagon team shied away from the golden horse a little. Hatfield swung one leg over the saddle and stood in his left stirrup. He let the wagon gain a little more, until the high seat was directly opposite. Holding Goldy's speed equal to that of the team, he estimated the distance and leaped. His clutching hands gripped the iron railing around the seat. He hung for an instant, his feet banging against the spinning front wheel, then by a prodigious muscular effort drew himself up and clambered onto the seat.

With lightning swiftness he unwound the reins from about the leg protruding over the back of the seat. From the tail of his eye he saw that the leg belonged to a man who lay on his back on the heaped sacks of something in the wagon's bed. The man's face was covered with blood, but he was rolling his head from side to side in returning consciousness. Another man lay on his back, a blue hole between his staring eyes.

Hatfield shoved the leg out of the way, tightened the reins and put forth his strength. For minutes his efforts appeared to have not the slightest effect on the racing horses, and the hairpin turn was leaping to meet them with alarming speed. Gradually, however, the Ranger's iron strength began to tell. The horses floundered a little, their gait became broken. But now the turn was less than two hundred yards distant.

JIM HATFIELD put forth every ounce of force in his body. His great fear was that the reins might snap under the strain. Then it would indeed be the end. But the heavy straps held. The horses slowed to a jolting trot, a walk. With the turn scarce a score of feet distant, they came to a halt and stood blowing and panting and rolling frightened eyes, but with all the "run" taken out of them.

Behind Hatfield a voice was calling thickly. He turned, and saw the bloody-faced man on his knees gripping a rifle with trembling hands.

"Look out, feller!" he gasped hoarsely. "Them hellions are right on top of us."

Hatfield leaned over the seat and snatched the rifle from him even as the sound of racing hoofs reached his ears. A group of masked men bulged around a turn less than a hundred yards to the rear.

Hatfield did not hesitate. The rifle leaped to his shoulder, spat fire and smoke. One of the riders reeled sideward with a yell of pain. The speeding horses were suddenly jerked back on their haunches. Hatfield fired again, saw the leg of a second man fly from the stirrup, and heard another agonized bellow. He fired a third time, and scored a miss.

A scattering of wild shots answered him. Lead whined past. But, sheltered behind the high wagon seat, he did not offer much of a target. As he lined sights a fourth time, a voice bellowed orders. The group whirled their horses and went skalleyhootin' back around the turn. Hatfield sent a couple more slugs after them, then lowered the smoking rifle.

The man in the back of the wagon was sitting up on the bulging sacks, looking sick and shaky, but apparently not much the worse for the bullet crease along the side of his head.

"Feller," he said thickly, "I'm shore obliged, plumb obliged. I never see anythin' that looked as good as you did when yuh come climbin' onto that seat. I was just gettin' my senses back, but I couldn't move or do a thing. I shore figgered I was a goner, like poor Jess here. Think them sidewinders will come back?"

Hatfield shook his head as he slipped over the seat and proceeded to bandage the man's wound with a handkerchief.

"Reckon they're still tryin' to figger what happened," he replied. "No, they wouldn't risk a chance comin' back around that bend. They'd expect too hot a reception. The odds are all against 'em, and they know it. What in blazes is this all about? Since when have owlhoots taken to drygulching freight wagons around here?"

The man hesitated, appeared to make up his mind about something.

"Reckon yuh got a right to know," he

said, "and if yuh hanker to grab it off, I figger yuh've earned it." He gave the Ranger a wan grin. "The Harqua Mine pay roll money is under them sacks—nigh onto twenty thousand dollars in gold."

Hatfield stared at him. "I met the stage comin' down trail a little while ago," he remarked. "It was guarded."

The wounded man nodded. "Uh-huh. That was to fool Quantrell. It didn't foo' him. Nothin' ever fools that sidewinder. The stage went through without any trouble. But when we come along with the wagon, Quantrell knowed the money was in it, but don't ask me how. Him and his bunch throwed down on Jess and me. Plugged us both, but the horses got scared at the shootin' and bolted.

"This wagon load looks heavy, but ain't. Nothin' but bran in them sacks. The broncs didn't pay it no mind when they decided to git up and git. Before them owlhoots could get down off the ridge where they were holed up—the cliffs end just over the rise—the broncs had a head start."

Hatfield nodded. "Somebody in the Quantrell outfit shore is in the know," he commented thoughtfully, more to himself than to his companion. "Well," he continued, "figger yuh can take this shebang into town alone? The sheriff should be notified, and yuh want the doctor to patch up yore head."

"I can take her in," the man said. "I'm the driver. Poor Jess was supposed to be my leader. The rifle was hid under the sacks."

"Lucky it was," Hatfield replied. "Mine is on my hoss over there, and it would have been long shootin' with sixes. Lucky, too, them reins tangled about yore leg when yuh fell. Looks like you sort of got the best of it."

"And the best was you comin' along when yuh did, feller," the driver declared, with great heartiness. "Yuh goin' to ride on to Dorantes? Ain't yuh scared them sidewinders might be layin' for yuh?"

"Not much chance," Hatfield said. "I've a notion they figgered I was one of the stage coach guards come back to see what was goin' on, and that the rest of them salty-lookin' jiggers might not be far behind. No, I reckon they hightailed and kept siftin' sand. . . I'll get my hoss. You head for town."

Despite his assuring words to the wagon driver, Hatfield was on the alert during the rest of his ride. However, he reached the railroad town without further incident and sent the message to Captain McDowell.

He ate a hearty meal and headed back to Gavilan, arriving at the mining town at daylight. He and Goldy were both pretty well worn out by the excitement and the eighty-mile amble, but suffered nothing that a few hours of rest wouldn't right.

CHAPTER XIII

Missing Girl

CHORES took considerably more of Sharon's time than had been anticipated, keeping her busy all the following morning and part of the afternoon. Then, while they were eating before starting back to the ranch, a sudden rainstorm came up, with a torrential downpour that lasted nearly an hour before the skies cleared. As a result, the sun was well down in the west before they finally got under way.

They rode at a good pace along the muddy trail. They passed the Shanghai M ranchhouse and rode on for several miles. Here the trail curved slightly, running along the edge of a steep, brush-grown slope that fell away to the right. On the left was open prairie, with scattered clumps of thicket near the trail.

They were passing one of these when a slight rustling of brush in the thicket jerked Hatfield's head around. There was the ringing crack of a rifle. Jim Hatfield threw up his arms and pitched sideward from the saddle. He hit the slope beyond the edge of the trail, rolled down it, arms and legs thrashing, crashed through a bristle of growth and vanished.

Sharon Remington screamed chokingly, then stared with dilated eyes at three masked men who rode out of the nearby thicket, rifles ready, the muzzle of one still wisping smoke.

"Stay put, ma'am," a voice called harshly. "Don't want to have to plug yuh, but we will if yuh try to run."

In another instant his grip was on the

girl's bridle. His companions peered cautiously down the slope, from which came no sound or movement.

"Don't worry about him," Sharon's captor called. "When I line sights on a jigger, I don't miss. I got him square between the eyes. Didn't yuh see the way he went out of the hull? Only a jigger plugged in the head falls that way."

"Mebbe we'd better go down and make shore," one of his companions suggested doubtfully.

"We ain't wastin' no time," the other man growled. "This is a traveled trail, and there's still more'n a hour of daylight. Want a bunch of cowhands to run into us with this gal in tow? Come on, get goin'. Alf, catch that yaller hoss."

One of the men started to obey. He reached for Goldy's bridle.

There was a scream of rage, a flash of milk-white teeth and the man dodged back, howling. Blood streamed from his lacerated hand. Goldy whirled, streaked away into the thicket, curses and bullets volleying after him as he vanished from view. Hoofs thudded north along the muddy trail.

Half-unconscious, and completely paralyzed by the terrific blow of the bullet on his skull, Hatfield lay beneath a screening brush far down the slope. Dimly he heard the shooting at his horse, then the thud of receding hoofbeats. Instinctively he catalogued their direction—to the north. Then his senses left him. . . .

Hatfield awakening was painful. He was sore and bruised all over, and his head ached abominably. But there was no limb that would not function, no joint that would not bend. Thankfully he realized, as he raised a trembling hand to his bloody head, that his wound was but a slight crease just above the right temple.

"But if I hadn't heard that brush snap and jerked my head around just as the hellion pulled trigger, I'd have got it dead center," he muttered. "Looks like I was sort of off-trail when I figgered havin' that map would keep the sindwinders from drygulchin' me. They have other notions."

He got to his feet, his strength quickly returning, and clawed his way up the slope. He was consumed with anxiety over what might have happened to Sharon.

He reached the trail, glared about. There was no one in sight, but tracks plainly scored in the muddy surface of the trail led north. As he stared at them, a plaintive whinny sounded. Goldy was peering from the shelter of the thicket. Hatfield gave a sharp whistle and the big sorrel trotted to him and nuzzled his hand.

"Couldn't drop a loop on you, feller, could they?" Hatfield exclaimed thankfully. "Well, that's mighty lucky, 'cause you and I have work to do."

HE FORKED the sorrel, settled himself in the saddle. His face was set in lines as bleak as chiseled granite, his eyes were coldly gray. He glanced at the sun, which was just touching the tips of the western crags, estimated the period of daylight that remained. He knew he could have been unconscious for but a little while, but long enough to let the owlhoots and their captives get a head start.

"And they know just where they're goin', and I don't," he muttered. "They'll hightail, and I'll be slowed down by watching their trail. They're headed for somewhere in the west hills, shore as shootin', and if it goes dark on me before I find out just where, they'll give me the slip."

He headed Goldy along the trail at a fast clip, for the hoof prints were so deeply scored in the soft surface that only an occasional glance was necessary to assure him that he was on the right track. For more than two miles the prints held to the trail, then they abruptly swerved to the left across the prairie, diagonaling toward the dark loom of the hills.

Here the going was more difficult. But the rain-drenched soil still held the marks plainly enough for the keen eyes of the Lone Wolf to discern them.

But now the sun was behind the western crags. The mountain crests were aflame with strange and glorious fires, but dark shadows swatched their slopes and were already creeping across the rangeland. Hatfield's black brows drew together and his lips tightened. There was just one thing in his favor. The owlhoots, undoubtedly convinced that the shot which hurled him from the saddle had been a fatal one, had made no attempt to cover their trail.

Finally, however, he was forced to dismount and proceed on foot, bending low

over the sodden grass to see the crushed blades that alone showed the marks of passing hoofs. Despair was settling its cold blanket over him when the trail suddenly turned due west toward a dark canyon mouth.

Hatfield drew a deep breath of relief. The canyon was narrow, with almost perpendicular, towering walls. So long as they followed the gorge, the owlhoots could only forge straight ahead. He took a chance, forked Goldy again, and rode between the stony walls.

The floor of the canyon was rocky, grown with scattering brush of no great height, but its crowding walls forbade any turning aside by the quarry. Hatfield began seriously to estimate the lead they might be holding, and to consider the danger of a too close approach.

Then abruptly the canyon forked. Hatfield pulled up with a muttered oath, dropped from saddle and went down on hands and knees. Back and forth he covered the ground, his face close to the stony soil. There was still a little light in the sky, and the dregs of it seeped into the gorge.

But nowhere could he find a trace of horses' irons to tell which fork of the canyon held his quarry!

When he was about ready to take a gamble at following the main canyon westward, he found what he was seeking. A little ways down the fork that veered to the south, he saw a broken branch dangling from a bush. The break was clean and fresh, the leaves of the twig still unwilted.

"Busted off by a hoss brushin' against it," he thought exultantly.

He mounted once more and rode down the left fork, slowly now, for the sky was completely dark and only the shimmer of starlight filtered a ghostly glow into the gorge.

Suddenly he pulled Goldy to a halt. Somewhere ahead was a faint clicking, the beat of fast hoofs on the hard soil.

Hatfield's mind worked at lightning speed. The sound told him that a single horseman was advancing up-canyon. He slipped to the ground, herded Goldy behind a bristle of growth, and waited. He drew his gun as the horseman drew near. But when the shadowy shape of the mounted man outlined against the sky, he held his fire.

"There were three of 'em—easy to tell that by the prints back there on the trail," he told himself. "That means that two are somewheres down this crack with Sharon. This jigger is headin' for somewheres outside—likely to fetch the rest of the bunch, or to tell somebody they pulled off their chore. Downin' him won't help matters and will just warn the two hangin' onto Sharon."

STANDING tense and silent, he watched the horseman slog by. Not until the clicking had died away up the canyon did he risk an advance. He rode slowly, so that the beat of Goldy's hoofs would be at a minimum. He had covered nearly a mile more, and was considering proceeding on foot when suddenly he sniffed sharply. There was an undoubted tang of wood smoke on the air.

"Getting close," he decided, and halted the sorrel.

The canyon had widened somewhat and the low bushes nearer its mouth had been replaced by tall and thick growth. Hatfield forced Goldy into a thicket and tethered him.

"You stay here and keep quiet till I show up," he told the sorrel. "I won't be long, the chances are, if I come back at all. If I don't yuh can bust the bridle and look out for yoreself."

He proceeded cautiously on foot. The smell of smoke grew stronger. He pushed through a final fringe of brush and paused. Directly ahead was a shallow clearing, and not a hundred yards distant was a glowing square of yellow light, with something dark and bulky looming behind it.

Hatfield quickly identified the glow as the light from a window in the wall of a roughly built cabin set close to the brush that grew along the eastern canyon wall. From its stick-and-mud chimney rose a spiral of smoke.

"They're in there," he muttered. "The hellions must have more hangouts than a badger. This is a regular hole-in-the-wall country."

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CHAPTER XIV

In the Canyon Cabin

IN A SHORT time, as the starlight strengthened a trifle, Hatfield was able to make out details. The closed door of the cabin faced toward the west wall of the canyon. He considered the situation. To advance across the clearing would be altogether too risky. If anybody was watching out the window, he would be sure to be spotted before he could reach the building. He began to edge along the growth, carefully keeping in its shadow.

"If that shack just has a back door, I've got a chance," he told himself.

He reached the growth back of the cabin, stole forward with cautious steps. Soon he was directly behind the shack and only a few paces distant. Exultantly he realized that there was a back door, and, what was more, it stood slightly ajar, as a thin streamer of light evidenced.

Taking a chance, he slipped a little nearer, peering and listening. To his ears came the sound of footsteps on the board flooring, and of harsh voices. Somewhere nearby a tethered horse stamped impatiently. He debated a quick dash for the partly open door, but regretfully decided against that.

"Couldn't do it without making some noise, and my eyes would be dazzled for a second by the light. If them two sidewinders happened to be both facin' the back door, it would be too bad. Besides, Sharon might be right in my line of fire. No, I've got to get the jiggers to the window or the front door somehow. With their attention on the front of the cabin and their backs to this door, I'll have a chance."

Slipping back to the growth, he cautiously but swiftly made his way through it until he reached a point almost opposite the cabin window, which was set in the side wall near the front of the shack. He wormed his way deeper into the brush and began gathering dry twigs and branches, carefully selected such as had not been drenched by the recent rain. He worked at top speed, for there was no telling how soon the third man would return, doubtless with plenty of reinforcements to back him up.

Soon he had a sizable pile of dry wood heaped beneath a bush. With his knife he smoothed and leveled one side of a thick branch. This he carefully balanced on top of the pile. On the flat surface of the branch he laid two cartridges taken from his belt.

Then he struck a match and set fire to the heap. The smaller twigs at the bottom burned briskly, the flames licking upward.

With a final glance at his handiwork, Hatfield turned and sped swiftly back to the rear of the cabin. He reached it, drew as near the door as he dared and crouched alert and expectant. Inside he could hear the movements of the two owlhoots, and their rumbling voices. Evidently they were preparing a meal.

Nerves strained to the breaking point, the Ranger waited, and nothing happened. Had the cartridges rolled from the limb and bounced away from the fire? Began to look like it. He straightened up a trifle, to ease his cramped muscles, drew his guns, and tensed for the dash to the cabin door, which, he decided, he would have to risk, after all.

Startlingly loud in the silent night, a sharp report sounded from the edge of the clearing. Almost instantly it was followed by another.

Hatfield heard the owlhoots' startled exclamations, and the pound of their boots as they dashed for the window. He lunged forward, covered the distance to the back door on flying feet and hit it with the point of his shoulder. It flew wide open with a crash, banging against the cabin wall. Narrowing his eyes against the light, Hatfield saw the two owlhoots crouching low by the window, through which they were cautiously peering. They surged erect and whirled as the door banged open. Instantly the cabin seemed to explode with the roar of six-shooters.

Only seconds later, with one sleeve shot to ribbons, and blood trickling from a bullet burn on his left hand, Hatfield lowered his smoking guns and stared through the fog at the two forms sprawled on the cabin floor.

"Reckon they're through hootin' for good," he muttered, as he holstered his Colts and whirled about.

SHARON REMINGTON lay on a bunk built against the far wall. Her wrists and ankles were loosely bound. With a couple of sweeps of his knife, Hatfield freed her. He raised her to a sitting position and she clung to him, shuddering convulsively. Her face was haggard, her eyes red from weeping.

"Oh, Jim!" she sobbed. "I thought you were dead!"

"Not yet," he told her. "Reckon I take considerable killin'. Just lost a patch of hide off my head. Come on, honey, pull yoreself together. We got to get out of here pronto. No tellin' when we'll have company we don't want."

Taking only time to make a swift examination of the bodies of the dead owlhoots —hard-faced, unsavory-looking characters with nothing to single them out—he led her from the cabin. He quickly located her horse, tied with those of the two owlhoots under a lean-to on the far side of the cabin.

"Up with yuh," he told her. "Yuh're in no shape for walkin'."

Taking the bridle, he headed back up the canyon, the led horse ambling along behind him. Before long he was mounted on Goldy and they were riding swiftly out of the gorge.

It was nervous going until they reached the open rangeland. Hatfield hated to think of meeting the whole Quantrell bunch in the narrow canyon, and he had a premonition that was just what was liable to happen if they didn't get out in a hurry. He heaved a sigh of relief when the canyon walls at last fell away and the star-burned prairie rolled before their eyes.

Another half hour and they were pounding south on the open trail.

They found Grant Emory, a badly worried Emory, awake when they reached the ranchhouse, long after midnight. He greeted them with great relief.

"I figgered mebbe yuh'd decided to stay in town, but I couldn't be shore," he explained. "The last thing yuh said before leavin' was that yuh'd shore be back for supper. I was gettin' jumpy. What happened?"

They told him, Hatfield in terse sentences, Sharon stressing the part the Ranger had played in the affair. Emory's face blackened with rage as he listened, and his hands balled into anger-trembling fists.

"This is gettin' beyond bearin'!" he roared. "Not even womenfolks are safe any more. Hatfield, I shore owe yuh a heap."

"I got the luck," Hatfield smiled. "And now I figger the little lady had better hit the hay. She looks sort of peaked."

After Sharon had retired, Emory strode back and forth nervously, muttering and clenching his fists.

"If it hadn't been for you they'd have killed her," he declared hoarsely.

"I don't know," Hatfield admitted. "Killin' a woman is goin' a mite far, even for a bunch like that, but I agree they could hardly have turned her loose."

"And they would have got away with it," mumbled Emory. "Nobody would have suspected 'em. It's easy to figger what folks would have thought—good-lookin' cowboy and purty girl ride away together and don't show up no more. Things like that have happened before I shore hope it don't here, though," he added, with a wry smile.

Hatfield chuckled. "I don't figger yuh've got anything to worry about on that score," he comforted. "I've a notion the little lady ain't goin' to ride away from here with anybody, unless you two decide to sell out and pull up stakes."

"I shore hope not," Emory repeated, "but I'm scared I ain't got much to offer a smart, purty girl like her."

"Feelin' that way gives yuh plenty to offer," Hatfield replied.

Emory paused in his pacing, turned to the book shelves and took down a volume.

"I'm too worked up to sleep," he said. "Reckon I'll just study a mite."

Hatfield glanced at the title of the book. It was "Elementary English Grammar."

Emory looked up, a trifle sheepishly. "I'm tryin' to learn to talk a mite better," he explained. "I never got a chance for much schoolin'. I was right young when Dad cashed in, and Mom had it hard till she married Wes Remington, years later. I had to go to work early."

HATFIELD nodded. There was a glow in his green eyes and he looked pleased.

"Many a jigger has got a good education all by himself, when he was older than

you," he said. "So the books over there ain't yores?"

"No," relied Emory. "They might as well be writ in some other language for all I could make head or tail of what's in 'em. They belonged to Wes Remington. He was smart, and educated, like Sharon."

Hatfield nodded again, looking even more pleased.

"Go to it," he said, patting Emory on the shoulder. "And have Sharon give yuh a hand when the goin' gets tough. I know she'll be glad to, and she should be able to help yuh a lot. By the way, if yuh don't mind, I'd like to look over them books some time. They look interestin'."

Emory shook his head enviously. "Wish they was to me," he replied. "Shore, help yoreself to 'em any time yuh feel like it. Yuh'll have considerable spare time after the roundup is over. . . ."

Three days later the roundup started. The southwest range of the Scab Eight, because of its central location relative to the other spreads of the valley, was chosen as the main holding spot. All the cowmen of the valley were present, even Talbot Morrow being driven to the scene in a buckboard, so that he might observe the activities, though his condition made it impossible for him to take part in the work.

Walsh Knox had been chosen roundup boss, and he proved an efficient choice. In such an affair, personal animosities and preferences go by the board. Knox immediately appointed Grant Emory his chief lieutenant, it being generally agreed that Emory was about the best tophand in the valley.

"That is, he used to be," the cowboys told one another after the first day's work. "He shore ain't no snide, but he can't twirl his loop within a steer's length of that big feller Hatfield. Gentlemen, there's the sort of cowhand yuh hear tell about and don't ever see. He's even got it all over Walsh Knox, and that's goin' some."

Knox and Emory handed the cowboys their orders and the hands got busy carrying out the orders. Starting out in groups, each group under the direction of a leader chosen by the roundup boss, they began scouring the range in search of vagrant cattle as well as large bunches.

The groups quickly broke up into small parties which soon scattered until each man was covering as much ground as was practicable. Where the ground was rough and broken, careful searching was necessary to gather up small bunches or individual cows. Soon cattle began arriving at the holding spot where they were surrounded and held in close herd.

Then began the work of cutting out of the various brands and running the tallied cows to various subsidiary holding spots. Later each owner would cut his own herd, selecting beefs for shipment and running the culls back onto the range. All canyons, coulees, foothills and brakes were carefully combed for strays.

"I don't want any mavericks found strayin' around after this cow hunt is over," Knox warned his lieutenants, who passed on the word to their men.

[*Turn page*]

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CHAPTER XV

The Old Mine's Secret

PROBABLY the most difficult piece of ground to work was the southwest range of the Lazy R. The foothills were slashed with canyons and there were large stands of thick chaparral growth. After the first day's work, Emory shrewdly handed this chore to Hatfield and a group of picked riders.

"And I'll bet a hatful of pesos yuh won't find even a patch of hair on a bush when that big jigger gets through with the section," Emory boasted to Knox.

The Shanghai M foreman grunted, and tugged at his chin whiskers, but did not attempt to argue the point.

"We got a nice shippin' herd, all right," Emory told Sharon Remington, "but believe me we lost cows durin' the past couple months! That herd is just about a third less than what it should be."

"And we can't afford any such loss, with the obligations the ranch has to meet," she said in worried tones. "How did the other spreads pan out?"

"They all lost," Emory replied, "but we lost the most, a lot the most. We're on a bad spot, down here next to the desert, of course. Gives the hellions the best whack at us. The only range that showed anythin' what it should have was the southwest range that Hatfield worked."

"And that range is the closest to the desert," Sharon remarked.

"Uh-huh, it is. You know, Hatfield mentioned that, too, in a funny way."

"How is that?"

"He said he wasn't surprised, that he figgered that range would make the best showin'."

"I wonder what he meant by that?"

"I don't know. When I asked him he just smiled, that smile of his that sometimes turns the corners of his mouth down a mite and don't never get up to his eyes like his smiles usually do. That's the second time I saw him smile that way. He did when Jud Hawkins of the Fiddle-Back, who's a bad-tempered cuss, hit his hoss with his fist for swellin' against the cinch. Hatfield smiled that way at Jud, and said, 'Don't do it again, Hawkins.'"

"What did Hawkins do?"

"Well, Jud has a reputation of bein' a mighty tough hombre, but he took a look at Hatfield's face—them green eyes were like a gun-barrel glintin' in the moonlight—and pulled in his horns pronto. He won't hit a hoss again, I figger, not when Hatfield's around."

The evening when the shipping herd was open-corralled on the Lazy R range, Hatfield and Emory found Sheriff Reeves at the ranchhouse when they rode in.

"Just dropped down to see how things were goin'," the lawman said.

"Better figger on spendin' the night," said Emory. "It's gettin' ready to rain cats and dogs, or I'm a heap mistook."

Emory proved a good weather prophet, for by the time supper was over the rain was coming down hard and the night was black as the inside of a bull in fly time. Emory, however, buttoned on his slicker and departed to keep an eye on the night hawks who were guarding the herd. He was taking no chances with that herd. Sharon retired soon afterward, and Hatfield and the sheriff were left alone in the big living room.

"Got a letter for yuh," the sheriff said, drawing an envelope from his pocket. "It's from Bill McDowell. The outer envelope was addressed to me, like yuh told him to do in the message yuh sent."

Hatfield opened the letter and spread it on the table.

"We'll read it together," he said, and bent over the page. Captain Bill had written:

Walsh Knox left Yuma county, Arizona, about six months ago. He accompanied his boss, a man named Talbot Morrow, who was a crippled man, and another cowhand named Quales who is a well-educated man who took to ranch work. It seems Morrow was a sick man, his legs paralyzed by a bullet that had lodged in his spine and which the doctors were afraid to remove. The doctors gave Morrow less than a year to live, I learned.

Morrow was heading back to the Big Bend country in Texas, where he was born, to take over property left him by his dad. Knox, who was his spread foreman in Arizona, and Quales went along to look after him on the trip. Morrow sold his spread in Arizona before leaving for Texas. He was well thought of and liked there, I was informed.

Knox had a reputation of being a first-rate cowman and a salty proposition. I learned there were stories saying that he once belonged to a

smuggling outfit, also that he ran cows across the Border from Mexico. But it seems nothing was ever proven against him, nor any charges brought anywhere, so far as the authorities knew.

Of Quales nothing much was known, although it was said he originally hailed from Texas. Knox had worked for Morrow several years, Quales for only a few months. That's about all I was able to get concerning Walsh Knox and his known associates.

"Well," grunted the sheriff, after they had finished the informative portion of the letter, "it don't tell us much we didn't already know."

HATFIELD, however, sat staring straight ahead of him, his eyes brooding. Suddenly the strangely colored eyes began to glow.

"Sheriff," he exclaimed, "mind taking a little ride with me?"

"Anythin' yuh say," replied Reeves, "but it's a whale of a night for a ride."

"And made to order for us," Hatfield said. "I've a notion every move I make is bein' close watched, but we don't have to worry about anybody tailin' us on a night like this. Wait—I'll put the light out, then we'll get our slickers and slide out the back door."

Ten minutes later found them riding eastward across the prairie in the driving rain. They reached the Dead Star Trail and turned south. With the plainsman's uncanny instinct for distance and direction, Hatfield divined the spot where the track to the old mine turned from the main trail.

With the disgusted sheriff swearing under his moustache, he located, after considerable searching, the stretch of screening brush that hid the entrance to the mine. They pushed their horses through the dripping fringe, halted and listened.

All was dark, however, and there was no sound other than the swishing of the rain and the moan of the wind through the growth. The mine tunnel was silent and deserted. Inside, Hatfield struck a a match and lighted a lantern they had brought with them.

The outer rock-walled room was much as he had left it the night of his escape from the owlhoots, except that the body of Gulden was not in evidence.

"Figgered they'd be shore to take him with 'em," Hatfield commented. "I hope they didn't think to take the other one with 'em, and I've a good notion they didn't. It would hardly be recognizable by now, anyway."

"What other one?" demanded the puzzled sheriff. "What yuh talkin' about anyhow?"

But without replying, Hatfield led the way to the inner room where he had been kept prisoner. The sheriff exclaimed at the mummified corpses of the Indians, but Hatfield did not waste a glance on them. He hurried directly to the corner where lay what looked to be a bundle of rags, but which was the shrunken, desiccated body of the man Gulden boasted had worn the prison chain prior to Hatfield, the man who had "got in the Boss' way."

Nearly all the flesh had sloughed away from the dead man's skull, but the skin of the body remained stretched over the bony skeleton.

Hatfield stripped off the rotting rag that had been a shirt, to bare the shrunken chest. Below the ribs on the left side showed the scar of an old bullet wound. He turned the body over on its face. No corresponding scar showed at the back.

Hatfield drew his keen-bladed knife. "This ain't goin' to be a nice chore to tackle, but it's necessary," he told the bewildered sheriff.

With swift, sure strokes he made incisions in the parchmentlike skin on either side of the spinal column. He cut away sections of the skin and the withered flesh, and removed several ribs. Suddenly he uttered a sharp exclamation. The sheriff bent close.

"See it?" Hatfield exclaimed. "Stuck in the back-bone?"

"A bullet," growled the sheriff. "Uh-huh, a slug, shore as shootin'."

"Yes," Hatfield replied quietly, "just as I expected. A slug lodged in the backbone, the bullet the doctors were afraid to remove, and which paralyzed Talbot Morrow."

Sheriff Reeves swore luridly. "And yuh figger this thing here is Tal Morrow?"

"It is," Hatfiield replied.

"Why—why then, that hellion up at the Shangahi M is nothin' but a cussed imposter, and a cold-blooded killer along with it?"

"Exactly," Hatfield said. "The man posin' as Talbot Morrow, the cripple, is

Quales, the cowhand who left Arizona with Morrow and Knox."

SHERIFF REEVES leaped erect.

"Come on!" he barked. "We'll get the cussed sidewinder! We got him dead to rights. The folks over in Arizona will recognize him as Quales, and not Morrow, right off."

"Hold it," Hatfield replied. "We haven't got much on him—yet. Yuh could have him sent to prison for fraud, and that's about all. In a mighty short time he would be out swallerforkin' again and causin' trouble for decent folks somewheres."

"But he cashed in poor Tal Morrow. Here's Tal's body to prove it."

"To prove he is dead, that's all. There is nothin' to show that Morrow didn't die of natural causes. Remember what Captain Bill's letter said—that the doctor gave Morrow less'n a year to live. Quales and Knox would swear the trip over here was too much for him and that he died before he got here, and that then they cooked up the scheme to get hold of his inheritance. No, we're not ready to move yet."

"How yuh goin' to get the real goods on the sidewinder then?" demanded the exasperated sheriff.

"I don't know, yet," Hatfield replied frankly. "Let's go. We got a long ride ahead of us."

The sheriff continued to swear and mutter as they got their horses ready.

"And that hellion fooled everybody in the valley!" he marveled.

"No reason why he shouldn't," Hatfield returned. "The set-up was perfect. Talbot Morrow left here nearly twenty years ago, when he was little more'n a boy. Quales must have his general build and looks. Usually, somebody might note differences in the resemblance. But the chief thing is—everybody was expectin' a cripple. That was fixed in every mind.

"A cripple shows up, or what looks like a cripple, so naturally nobody doubts it is Morrow. Knox was with Morrow a long time, in Arizona, and likely knows all about Morrow's early life, and he came here with a pretty good general idea as to who lives here and where. Also, Quales originally hailed from Texas, mebbe from the Big Bend country, which would make it still easier for 'em to carry on the deception. All set? Let's hit the trail."

CHAPTER XVI

By a Dead Hand

DAWN was streaking the clearing sky when Jim Hatfield and Sheriff Reeves arrived at the Lazy R ranchhouse. The sheriff went to bed to get a few hours of sleep before heading back to town, but Hatfield sat in the living room, thinking. Finally, with a disgusted exclamation, he got up and began examining the technical books on the shelves. Most of them were standard works with which he was familiar, but a volume entitled, "Prospecting as a Science" was new to him. He took it from the shelf, sat down, and began turning the pages.

Something slipped from between the leaves and fluttered to the floor. Hatfield picked it up. It was a yellowed sheet of paper covered with figures and symbols. He glanced at it idly, recognizing it as the solution of a rather complicated equation in higher mathematics beginning "V equals the square root of P plus the cube root of M." ($V = VP + V^3M$).

He was about to lay the paper aside when a sudden familiarity of the tiny lettering and finely drawn lines struck him. His brows knitted in perplexity. Abruptly he exclaimed aloud, and fumbled with his secret belt pocket. He drew forth the mysterious map and spread it beside the paper.

"I thought so," he muttered. "The writing is identical. Whoever worked out this equation also drew the map. And who else but old Weston Remington, Sharon's father! This *is* interestin'!"

He stared at the two papers, suddenly noted something that caused him to bend closer, his eyes narrowing.

"Blazes!" he exclaimed. "What I took for a V on the map ain't a V at all. It's a Radical Sign! That sentence on the map don't read, 'V of Perdida to Harqua—Perdida W.' It reads 'The square root of Perdida to Harqua—Perdida W', meaning the square root of the distance from Perdida Peak to Harqua Mine, I'll bet a hatful of pesos. And Perdida W means west from Perdida Peak. I'll bet on that, too. The square root of the distance from Per-

dida Peak to the Harqua Mine west of Perdida Peak.

"Let's see, now. I'd estimate the distance from Perdida Peak to the mine as around fifty miles. The square root of fifty is seven, plus. West a little more than seven miles. That would put the point designated well into the mountains over there."

He stared at the map, exclaimed again.

"And these lines that didn't seem to mean anything. They form a right triangle, with the right angle formed by a line drawn directly south from the Harqua Mine and a line drawn west from Perdida Peak seven miles west and on that line drawn from the Harqua, doubtless, near where the angle is formed. That's what old Remington was trying to show. This is his map, and the key is in the letterin', although if I hadn't happened on this second paper and saw that he made the Radical Sign with an unusually short horizontal bar, I'd have kept on thinking the sign was a V, and gettin' nowhere. Looks like I'm due for another ride, but not in the daytime. Well, now I can sleep. . . ."

Hatfield was up in time, however, to speak to the sheriff before he rode to town.

"Get set for business," he told Reeves. "I've got a notion we're goin' to get the break I hoped for. Yuh'll hear from me soon, if things work out."

Hatfield was busy with ranch chores all day. He went to bed early, as did the other tired cowboys. But in the dark hours before dawn he slipped out of bed, dressed quietly in the dark, and headed for the barn.

Within a few minutes he was riding swiftly west across the range. Before the break of morning he was in the foothills of the mountains to the west. He worked his way south until he was directly opposite the mighty bulk of Perdida Peak, then he turned Goldy and headed due west.

A mile, two miles, he rode, climbing the ragged slopes of the hills. It was full day now. He reined Goldy in as he passed through a thicket and sighted, directly ahead, a towering rock wall fully a thousand feet in height. Hatfield stared at the tremendous rampart.

"Well," he told himself, "there's shore no goin' west any farther than this, though I figger I've come about the right distance anyhow."

HE RODE closer and examined the mighty barrier with the eye of a geologist. He shook his head dubiously. If there was ever rock devoid of mineral content, it was this wall of gloomy granite fanging upward into the blue of the Texas sky.

"But if it don't place the line of the long leg of the triangle, I'm makin' a big mistake in my estimates," he declared.

He saw that the line of cliffs extended south as far as the eye could reach. To the north it apparently ended a little more than a mile from where he forked the sorrel. He turned and gazed across the rangeland to the spire of Perdida.

"A mite south of that hill right now," he decided. "Reckon I'd better try north first."

He rode slowly along the face of the cliff, threading his way among bristles of thicket and clumps of stone. It was difficult and tortuous track along the base of the wall, but possible to negotiate. From time to time he studied the rock as he rode. Suddenly his eyes narrowed with interest.

The upper portion of the wall was changing. Hatfield could see that a lighter colored stone was replacing the basic granite that still formed the foundation of the great natural battlement. The difference in the stone was slight in appearance. It would doubtless have been overlooked by anyone not well grounded in such matters. But the line of cleavage, diagonaling down the wall to the north was, to the Lone Wolf, plainly apparent.

"A not unusual formation," he mused. "Durin' the great volcanic upheavals of millions of years ago, a strata overlyin' the lower granite was thrust upward by pressure from beneath, or by a lateral squeezin' force. A dozen such layers show in the walls of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. That rock up there is plumb different from this lower down, although it looks much the same. If it keeps slantin' down this way, before I reach the end of the cliffs, it should be low enough for me to get a good look at it. Shore appears to be quartz, all right. This thing is beginnin' to tie up after all."

Another half-mile and he saw that the cliff wall did end, directly ahead. Almost at his feet was the sheer drop of a perpendicular-sided canyon of great depth. The right-angling cliff wall to the west formed the lofty rimrock of the canyon west of this point. And here the upper strata of lighter colored stone had dropped to almost level with the ground.

"Quartz, all right, not granite," the Ranger muttered, staring at the cold, gray surface. "Well, right around here I should hit on what old Remington was tryin' to show, or I don't hit on it at all. I'm directly in line west from Perdida Peak now. But I shore don't see anything promisin'."

He dismounted and walked to the lip of the canyon, glancing down into its gloomy depths. Far, far below, he could see shadowy black fangs of stone and the tops of pine trees looking fragile as feathers at the bottom of the tremendous drop.

He leaned oved the edge, craned his neck and stared up the western continuation of the great wall. Up and up it soared, beetling surface shimmering wanly in the morning sunlight, its crest ringed about with saffron flame.

Suddenly Hatfield observed something that quickened his interest. Slanting up the cliff face was what appeared to be a wide ledge that continued until it reached the crest. For a moment he was at a loss to account for such an unexpected formation, then the obvious explanation occurred to him.

"That upper rock is softer'n the granite," he reasoned. "The granite is like a big cup holdin' the quartz formation in its bowl. The quartz is the softer stone and erodes easier. In the course of untold ages, it has weathered more'n the granite and has receded from the base rock, that's all. That ledge is the lip of the broader granite base. And it should extend all the way down and around the corner here."

Closer examination proved this to be the case. The ledge curved around the angle and descended until it tapered off to a narrow shelf only a few feet above the ground.

Hatfield walked to the beginning of the shelf and peered upward. He could see but a short distance, only to where the ledge curved around a bulge a few yards higher up. He dropped his eyes to the ground and noticed several small fragments of stone lying beneath the shelf. Something in their appearance caught his eye. He stooped and picked one up.

IT WAS cracked and crumbly and, sprinkled through it, thick as raisins in a pudding, were irregular lumps of a dull yellow color. Also there were crooked yellowish "wires" crisscrossing the surface of the rock. Hatfield whistled softly as he turned it over in his fingers.

"Exactly the same as the chunk of high-grade I took from that salt cart," he exclaimed. "Right here is where that cart load come from! This is what Weston Remington found. And this is what he was killed for! That prospector, Ander! Remington must have told him of the find, and not bein' a practical minin' man himself, he wasn't quite shore of what he had found, so brought Ander up here to show him the ledge and get his opinion.

"Ander killed Remington, and stole his map. He knew, of course, that the ledge was on ground owned by Remington, and that he couldn't himself locate the claim. All he could do was sneak out loads of high-grade after he had shaved his whiskers and disguised himself. But how did Quales, posin' as Talbot Morrow, catch on to it? And how did he know Ander had the map?

"That was why Morrow was killed, of course, to get that map away from him, although I've a prime notion if Quales had got hold of it he wouldn't have been able to decipher the key. Well, I figger to get the answer to those two posers before long. Now to find out just where this stuff came from."

He scrambled onto the shelf and began climbing the ledge. It was narrow at first, but quickly widened. Also, it slanted inward, like the petal of a flower. Soon Hatfield found himself scrambling upward between the towering face of the cliff on his left, and an upward sloping rim of stone on his right. He realized that he would be invisible to anyone who might happen to be on the ground at or near the base of the cliff.

He had covered perhaps a score of yards and was some thirty feet above the ground when he halted abruptly, staring at the face of the cliff. His attention was fixed on a wide, irregular band of darker gray marbled with black and reddish-yel-

low splotches that furrowed the cliff parallel to the outer wall of the shelf and extended indefinitely upward. He moved forward a few more paces, and paused again.

Here there was a scored-out hollow in the surface of the peculiar-looking band, scored out unmistakably by tools wielded by the hand of man. Chisel and drill marks were plain to see against the face of the rock. And the floor of the shelf was littered with stone fragments.

Hatfield exclaimed with satisfaction. He had discovered at last what old Weston Remington had indicated on his cryptic map—the location of a vein of astonishingly rich high-grade gold ore. Here the driver of the salt cart, the pseudo-peon who was undoubtedly Ander, the prospector, got the load of ore that vanished so mysteriously from the Lazy R ranchhouse yard.

"No wonder the hellions wanted to get all that ore away before it could be analyzed by the Harqua Mine people," Hatfield told himself. "A careful examination would have shown it wasn't Harqua rock, and soon as the word got around, everybody in this end of Texas would have been pawin' over the whole place tryin' to locate the ledge. And somebody might have by accident hit on it, just like Weston Remington did, the chances are, although he must have believed there was metal in these hills."

He examined the outcropping with great care, and quickly became convinced it was no mere pocket of rich ore, but a definite vein of unknown extent and doubtless immense value. With a sense of intense satisfaction, he sat down with his back against the cliff, fished out the "makin's" and rolled a cigarette.

He consumed the "brain tablet" with quiet enjoyment, pinched out the butt and rose to his feet. In an endeavor to ascertain the extent of the vein he scrambled up the steep shelf. It wormed and twisted in and out of depressions in the cliff and wound around bulges, so that at no time could he see ahead more than a short distance.

The vein extended for several hundred feet before it finally petered out.

"Plenty of width for easy workin', and in depth it may extend for miles down into the earth," he decided at length. "Well, it will make a mighty nice weddin' present for Emory and the little lady."

CHAPTER XVII

Baited Trap

URGED on by curiosity as to what he might find further, the Ranger continued to climb the ledge until he reached the crest of the cliff. Finally he scrambled out onto the flat top of the great precipice.

The level surface extended northward for hundreds of yards. Hatfield walked across and stood on the far lip. On this side the contours were different. A fairly steep slope rolled downward to the far-off floor of a wide canyon that bored southward through the hills.

"Opens out onto or west of the desert, the chances are," Hatfield mused. "Mebbe a continuation of that canyon up to the north where the owlhoots have their cabin hangout. I wouldn't be surprised if it is, and I wouldn't be surprised, either, if it's the route they took to run south the cows they stole from the valley.

"Of course those cows, or most of 'em, never went south by way of the Dead Star Trail. They were sneaked north and hid away in the canyons on the southwest range of the Shanghai M. Then, on dark nights, they would be slid into that crack in the hills and run south over to the west of the desert, where the goin' is easy enough.

"Quales, havin' eased out most of the old Shanghai M waddies and replaced them with his own men, could arrange the chores for his hands so that none of the honest punchers who worked for old Arn Morrow would be used on that southwest range. Simple enough scheme, under the circumstances. Easy to get by with, with nobody having any reason to suspect anything off-color about the Shanghai M setup.

"Folks, all thinkin' that Quales was Talbot Morrow would reason just like Grant Emory did, that it would be impossible for cows to be run north without bein' seen by the Shanghai M outfit. That's why so few cows were missin' from the Lazy R southwest range. Distance was too great

to risk a night run to the hole-ups."

He walked back to the ledge and descended to the ground, glanced at the sun, mounted Goldy and rode south. He rode for miles before he worked his way out of the hills and turned north by east. He was taking no chances with possible observers. Anybody spotting him now would have no reason to suspect where he had actually entered the hills under cover of darkness.

When Hatfield reached the Lazy R ranchhouse, late in the afternoon, he was surprised to find Sheriff Reeves impatiently awaiting him. The sheriff was alone in the living room and came to the subject of his visit without delay.

"Well," he growled, "I've a mighty good notion them hellions caught on and give us the slip. Morrow—I mean Quales—and Knox hightailed out of the country late yesterday. They drove to the railroad in a buckboard. Knox and another jigger carried Quales onto the evenin' eastbound train. Knox stayed on the train with him. I heard Morrow—I mean Quales—give out that he was goin' east for an operation that would give him back the use of his legs. Huh! I bet he's usin' 'em right now, puttin' distance between him and here!"

To the sheriff's surprise, Hatfield did not appear particularly perturbed over what he, Reeves, considered important and disquieting news. The Ranger merely nodded, and began rolling a cigarette. Sheriff Tom swore an exasperated oath.

"If I'd just got back in town in time yesterday, I'd have dropped a loop on the two sidewinders before they trailed their twine," he growled.

"Mighty glad yuh didn't get back in time," Hatfield remarked.

The sheriff stared, his jaw dropping. "What—how—" he sputtered.

"If yuh'd arrested Quales and Knox, yuh'd have spoiled everything," Hatfield interrupted. "As it is, we have a chance to corral the whole bunch. Things are gettin' hot, and Quales feels he must be on the job all the time, not posin' as a cripple in his ranchhouse most of it. He and Knox didn't ride that train any great distance. Right now, I'll bet a peso, they are back around here and ready for business. I figger they're gettin' mighty jumpy and it will be easy to bait a trap for 'em."

In terse sentences he described what he had found in the western hills. The sheriff exclaimed in amazement.

"No wonder they been workin' every way they knew how to drop a loop on that claim," he said. "It'll be worth more'n the Harqua, judgin' from what you saw. And now what? Yuh got a plan?"

"Yes," Hatfield replied, "I've got one. Here it is, and the chore you have to do. I figger yuh'll need about ten special deputies yuh can trust to the limit. Take Emory along, and a few of his best hands. They got a right to be in on it. You pick the rest."

THE SHERIFF listened, tugging his mustache.

He shook his head dubiously when Hatfield had finished.

"Son," he said, "yuh'll be takin' one awful chance. If somethin' slips, it'll be the finish for you. Baitin' a trap like that with yoreself is puttin' yuh in the position of a worm on a hook with a big fish headed his way."

"Sometimes the worm wiggles off the hook before the fish gets there," Hatfield reminded, and smiled.

"Uh-huh," the sheriff commented dryly, "and yuh'd better wiggle mighty peart when the time comes!"

Two days later Hatfield rode away from the Lazy R ranchhouse in the bright sunlight of the early afternoon. He rode at a leisurely pace, lounging carelessly in the saddle, apparently paying little attention to anything, but in fact, his keen eyes missed nothing.

As he neared the first slopes of the western hills he thought he detected motion on the crest of a wooded rise to his left, but could not be sure. He shrewdly noted, however, that the growth which clothed the rise continued almost unbroken to the beginning of the slopes, and extended south almost to where Goldy began climbing the first swell of ground.

At an even, unhurried gait the great sorrel took the slopes. Not until he was less than a quarter of a mile from the canyon and the gold ledge, did he quicken Goldy's gait. He covered the final distance swiftly, instantly dismounted and tethered the sorrel within plain view, but well to one side. Then he slipped into the thick growth and waited.

Fifteen minutes or so passed, with only the twittering of the birds and the rustling of the leaves to break the silence. Then to his keen ears came a sound—a soft, muffled sound. The beat of slow-moving horses' hoofs some distance away.

Quickly it ceased and again there was silence, disturbed only by the peaceful sounds of nature. Hatfield stood tense and alert, his gaze fixed on the curve of the narrow open space between cliff and growth, a hundred paces or so distant.

Abruptly, without the least advance notice, a man materialized around the bend, peering, listening. He paused, then slipped forward a few paces, halted again. Another came into view, another and another until some eight or nine silent figures were grouped at the curve intently eyeing the terrain ahead.

Hatfield, peering through the thin screen of growth, could see that all were masked. The Quantrell bunch, the dreaded riders of the Dead Star Trail!

Suddenly one of the masked men pointed to Goldy standing with forward pricked ears. There was an instant clutching of weapons. For a moment no move was made, then a tall, broad man slightly in front gestured toward the ledge which wound up the cliff face. There was a bunching of heads, a turning of eyes in that direction. With one accord the group stole forward, headed for the ledge, guns out and ready. They clumped beneath it, peering and listening.

Like a thunderclap Jim Hatfield's voice rang out:

"In the name of the State of Texas! Yuh're under arrest for robbery and killin'!"

All heads jerked toward the sound of his voice. A crashing sounded in the brush that flanked the open space. The owlhoots whirled, and stared into the leveled guns of Sheriff Reeves and his posse.

Hatfield stepped into full view. His face was set in bleak lines. His eyes were coldly gray. On his broad chest gleamed the silver star of the Texas Rangers. His voice rang out again.

"Drop yore guns! Yuh're covered!"

There was an instant of paralyzed inaction. Then, with a scream of maniacal fury, a tall and slender owlhoot thrust forward his gun and fired point-blank at the Ranger.

But the Lone Wolf weaved sideward in a flicker of movement as the outlaw pressed trigger. The Ranger's hands flashed down and up. The two reports bomed as one. Hatfield stood tall and erect, but the masked man went down, kicking and clawing among the rocks. The air rocked to the roar of six-shooters.

A posseman pitched forward on his face. Another reeled back, clutching at his blood-spouting arm. But the owlhoots were falling fast. Half went down before the possemen's first volley. Another fell.

The others flung down their guns and howled for mercy. All except the tall, broad-shouldered leader. He whirled with lightning speed, leaped to the ledge and dived into the shelter of the slanting outer wall, lead spatting the cliff face above his head.

JIM HATFIELD raced forward, hurled the hand-lifted owlhoots from his path, leaped over a body on the ground and gained the ledge.

"Wait, Jim, wait!" roared Sheriff Reeves.

"Can't!" Hatfield shot back at him as he vanished into the cleft. "If he gets to that slope on the west he'll give us the slip!"

The possemen heard his boots beating the stony surface of the ledge.

But the outlaw had a head start. Twice Hatfield glimpsed him, darting around bulges far to the front. Each time he snapped a shot at the fleeing figure, and each time he knew he had missed. Grimly he set himself to run Quales down before the outlaw could reach the cliff crest. Slowly the Ranger gained, but now the crest was near, and Quales was still considerably ahead.

On the ground below, the possemen secured their prisioners and began ripping off the masks from the faces of dead and living. Sheriff Reeves and Grant Emory ran east along the slightly curving canyon rimrock until they could see the top of the towering wall and the point where the ledge reached it. Every sense strung to hair-trigger alertness, they waited. They heard Hatfield's shots, muttered under their breath, clutched their own weapons, never taking their eyes from the summit of the great wall.

Suddenly a tiny figure leaped into view on the cliff top, ran a few steps along the edge and whirled. A second figure appeared. Emory and Reeves could see the spurts of smoke and hear the thin crack of the guns as the two figures dodged and circled. Quickly they vanished from sight. A last stutter of shots drifted down to the watching pair.

Abruptly one of the figures reappeared, reeling back and back toward the cliff edge. It slumped, staggered another step and fell plummetlike from the dizzy verge. Turning slowly in the air it rushed downward and vanished into the gloomy depths of the canyon.

The second figure came into view, leaned over the lip, stared into the canyon. Then it turned and walked west and vanished.

Sheriff Reeves, his features set like granite, turned to the white-faced Emory.

"Well," he said in a husky voice that quivered with emotion, "the hellion got away. That was poor Jim went into the canyon. Quales bested him and hightailed west for the slope. Come on, let's see about the rest of those sidewinders."

CHAPTER XVIII

End of a Crooked Trail

QUALES was gone, but four of the owlhoots were dead. Three, one wounded, were still erect and firmly secured. Walsh Knox lay on the ground, breathing in hoarse gasps. A quick examination told the sheriff he was mortally wounded and going fast.

The sheriff was about to give orders toward the disposition of the prisoners when a scuffling sound came from the ledge above his head. He looked up quickly, saw the dimpled crown of a hat showing above the outer wall. He gave a joyous yell.

"Hatfield!" he whooped. "We figgered yuh to be done for shore!"

"Quales dropped his gun when I drilled him," Hatfield replied, slipping from the ledge to the ground. "I went back to pick it up. Souvenir. Sorry I gave yuh a start."

He walked over to where Knox lay and gazed down at the dying man. Knox's lips quirked slightly in the ghost of a smile. He beckoned feebly. Hatfield bent close.

"Feller," panted Knox, "here's a chance to even up for them matches and tobacco I give yuh that night in the mine. I want yuh to do somethin' for me."

"I'll do anything I can for yuh, Knox," Hatfield promised compassionately.

"Tell Sharon," whispered the dying man, "good-by for me. Tell her I wish I'd always rode a straight trail, like Grant Emory, then mebbe I'd had a chance with her. Emory and me fell out over her, yuh know."

"I'll tell her," Hatfield promised. "I've a notion she'll be glad to hear yuh went out thinkin' of her, and makin' a wish like that." He hesitated, gazing at Knox's contorted face. "Tell me somethin', Knox," he said. "Ander, the prospector, was one of Quales' outfit, wasn't he?"

"Yes," panted Knox. "He double-crossed us. Weston Remington used to come up to the *casa* to talk with Quales, who he thought was Tal Morrow, the son of his old friend. He showed Quales a chunk of the ore, and Quales found out somehow he'd made a map of the claim and meant to give it to Sharon. Quales knew the strike was worth a fortune, but Remington wasn't sure of what he had—thought mebbe it might be just a shallow pocket, and he hadn't finished gettin' title to the hill land. He kept the location under his hat.

"Quales set Ander to get in with him and find out what Remington knew. Ander looked to be a honest old-timer with his gray hair and whiskers, and Remington trusted him. He took Ander to the claim to get his opinion on it. Ander cashed in Remington and got his map. But he didn't come back to Quales. He hightailed out of the country. But he come back, after he'd shaved his whiskers and dyed his hair.

"Quales was almighty smart and spotted him right off. He set the boys to tail him. Ander was slippery and the boys couldn't catch him up. Quales knew he was slippin' out high-grade ore and sellin' it below the Border. He set a trap for him down by Perdida Peak, knowin' he had to use the Dead Star Trail to get across

the desert. You know how that ended."

Knox's eyes closed, but opened almost immediately. "Uh-huh," he whispered, "and I'm ended, too. Ended like a jigger that rides a crooked trail always ends."

The eyes closed wearily once more. They did not open again. . . .

As they rode out of the hills, with the possemen herding the prisoners ahead and assisting their own two wounded members, Grant Emory asked Hatfield a question.

"Jim, what made yuh first suspect Quales?"

"Mud," the Lone Wolf replied, smiling. "Mud on the inner sides of his boot-heels."

"Huh?"

"Remember the afternoon we rode up to the Shanghai M *casa* to discuss details of the roundup? Recall I was settin' on the edge of the porch? Quales, posin' as Talbot Morrow, the cripple, was settin' in a chair. From where I sat I had a good view of the inner sides of the high heels of his ridin' boots. The inner sides of the heels were caked with fresh mud. Now Morrow was supposed to be a cripple who couldn't stand on his feet. It looked mighty funny for a man who couldn't walk to have fresh mud on the heels of his boots. It shore set me to wondering. His hands helped, too."

JIM HATFIELD paused, and reached for the "makin's."

"How's that?" asked the sheriff.

"They were strong, virile hands, deep tanned," Hatfield replied. "Not the sort of hands yuh'd expect a man to have who'd spent the past two years inside, as Morrow was said to have done. That looked mighty funny, too. And right about then I was lookin' hard for somebody who might be Quantrell, the owlhoot. I'd already passed up Emory here as a suspect."

"Yuh sort of suspected me at first, then?" said Emory.

"Yes," Hatfield answered. "Yuh see, that mornin' when I wounded two of the bunch down by Perdida Peak, yuh showed up at the ranchhouse a little later, ridin' out of the desert, with two of yore men bullet-punctured. Set me to thinkin', all right, but it didn't take long to get yuh in the clear."

"How?"

Hatfield paused again to roll and light a cigarette.

"Because," he said then, "it didn't take me long to come to the conclusion that yuh didn't have much education."

"What did that have to do with it?" asked the sheriff.

Before replying, Hatfield fumbled a bit of greasy paper from his belt pocket.

"I got this note just before I rode to the Perdida country," he said. "It was a loco-lookin' thing I didn't attach much importance to, and I was about to destroy it when I noticed somethin' funny about it. See this wordin'? It reads: 'You ain't got a chance in an hundred to git out alive.' Well, the note seemed to be an illiterate scrawl, but no illiterate would ever use that construction *'an* hundred' instead of *'a* hundred'. Only a man of considerable education would use *'an'* that way.

"Right there the writer of the note slipped a mite. Didn't seem much, but it meant considerable to Emory, the way things turned out, and saved me wastin' time tryin' to get something on an innocent jigger. So, as I said, I was on the lookout for somebody who might be Quantrell. I'd already tied up Walsh Knox as one of the Quantrell bunch."

"How?" asked Emory.

"The night they had me corralled in the old mine, that forward-jutting chin whisker of Knox's showed plain under his mask. Also, Knox had a habit of pullin' at his beard. He raised his hand to do it twice while he was talkin' to me. He went to fetch the boss of the outfit, who, of course, was Quales. But till I got Captain Bill's letter, I was puzzled just the same, for it seemed just about certain that Talbot Morrow *was* a cripple, and had been for a couple of years.

"It wasn't reasonable he would have started buildin' up such a pose two years beforehand. But Captain Bill's letter made everything plumb plain. Three men left Arizona together. Only two showed up in Texas. Right then I was shore the supposed-to-be Morrow was Quales. And you know what we found in the mine, Sheriff."

"Uh-huh, poor Tal Morrow's body." Reeves nodded. Suddenly he chuckled. "I was shore lookin' sideways at Emory when he come into the saloon at Gavilan all scratched up that night of the row in

the mine office and them two hellions went through the window."

Hatfield smiled. "I knew Emory hadn't taken part in that chore the next morning," he remarked. "I questioned the mine super about the two hellions he got a look at. He told me their masks were tied tight over their faces. A jigger with his face wrapped up in a cloth wouldn't get scratched much goin' through a window."

The sheriff shook his head in admiration. "Yuh shore don't miss a trick," he exclaimed.

"That try at a pay roll robbery on the trail between Gavilan and Dorantes helped tie things up with Morrow, too," Hatfield added. "It showed that somebody in the Quantrell outfit had means of learnin' considerable about the Harqua Mine Company's business. And I'd already learned that Quales, as Morrow, owned some stock in the Harqua and was friendly with the superintendent."

EMORY broke in to ask a question. "Yuh figgered that salt cart driver was Ander, the prospector?" he asked.

"Yes, after Sharon told me the story of her father's death. The jigger who was drivin' the cart had his hair dyed black and not long before had shaved off a heavy beard he'd been wearin' for years. And I figgered Ander to be the only man besides Remington who knew where that high-grade ore was comin' from.

"I'd already decided it didn't come from the Harqua mine. The hellions were too desperately anxious to keep a specimen from bein' given a close examination. Ander would dig out a cart load of the ore, slip across the valley at night with the ore covered with a layer of salt, then amble down to Mexico as a salt peddler, and nobody who happened to see him would think anything of him or his load."

"And Quales figgered to get hold of the Lazy R," remarked Emory.

"Yes, in one way or another. I've a notion it was Knox saved yore hide for yuh. Knox had a streak of decency in him and I figger he wouldn't stand for havin 'yuh drygulched, because yuh'd once been friends and he knew Sharon liked yuh. Knox was a salty proposition.

"Of course, Quales was the brains and the boss of the bunch, but he knew better than to push Knox too far. So he satisfied himself with cleanin' the Lazy R of cows, knowin' that if yuh kept on losin', yuh wouldn't be able to meet yore bank obligations and would have to go out of business. Then, of course, he would buy up the Lazy R and the gold ledge with it.

"The only flaw in his scheme was that he didn't know where the ledge was. That's why I figgered we could trap him as we did today. He was shore I got the map from Ander and that I knew where the ledge was, and he figgered I'd lead him to it. Well, I did, but it didn't do him much good."

"Reckon he's makin' a lunch for the coyotes down in that canyon tonight," grunted the sheriff. "Bet yuh he pizens 'em."

The sheriff rode on to town with his prisoners. Hatfield elected to spend the night at the Lazy R.

"Sorry I can't stay for the wedding," he told Sharon the following morning, "but Captain Bill will have another little chore ready for me by the time I get back to the post. So I'll just kiss the bride *before* the ceremony, and be ridin'!"

Jim Hatfield pits himself against a greedy land-grabber whose slaughterhouse is the headquarters of an evil crew of conspirators and despoilers dedicated to the systematic plundering of all Texas in—

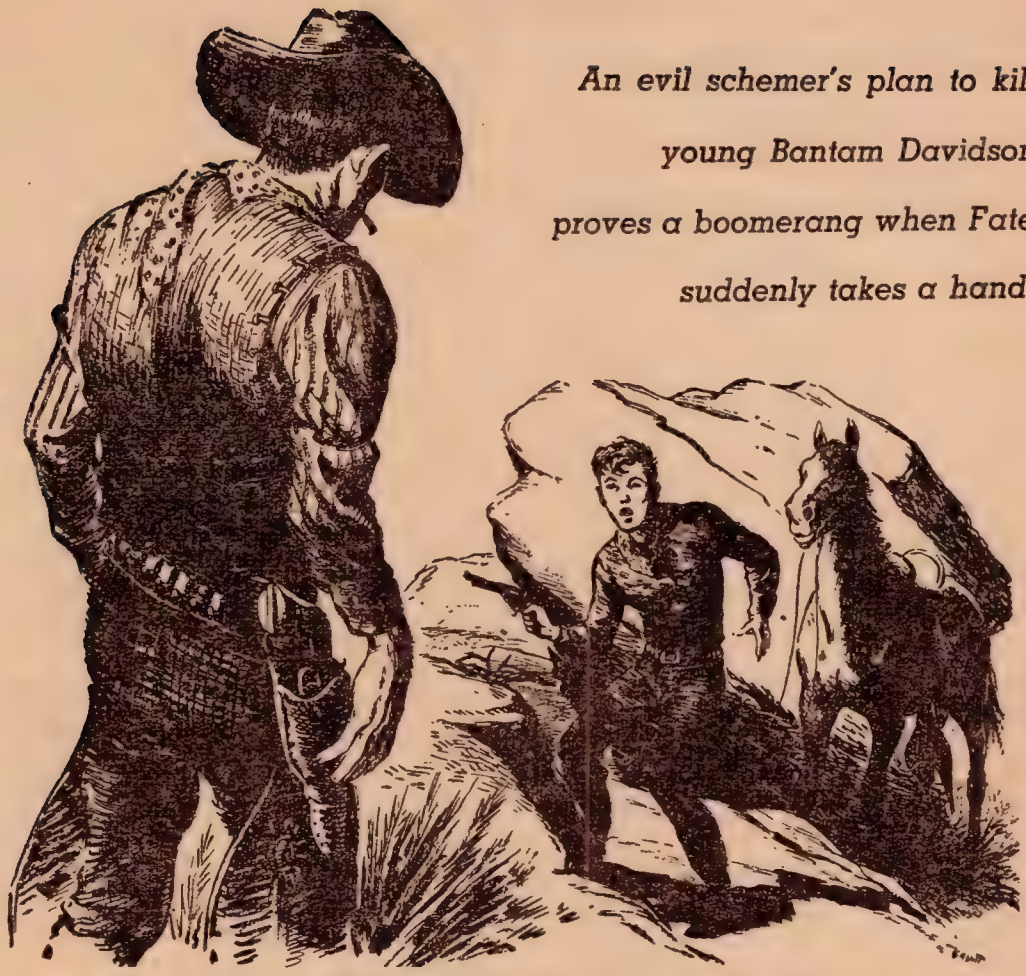
KING OF THE BRAZOS

By

JACKSON COLE

NEXT MONTH'S THRILL-PACKED COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL!

An evil schemer's plan to kill young Bantam Davidson proves a boomerang when Fate suddenly takes a hand!



"Practicin'?" an angry voice asked, and Bantam whirled to face Jackson Miller

Vengeance Is Mine

By VAL GENDRON

THE boy lay flat on the sun-baked rock, and his hand, still too small for the big .44, trembled as he fired again and again at the rude target he had constructed. The target roughly approximated a man, and sometimes it swam before his eyes.

It was not the heat waves that made the target dance, but tears of frustration. He couldn't hit it once in thirty times.

Before him stretched the endless malpais, dry, forbidding and tortuous. Behind him were the grazing lands, and from his position high in the mountains he could have seen the plain dotted with windmills if he had turned his head.

The windmills were at the bottom of all the trouble.

With his free hand he wiped the perspiration and tears from his face, leaving a dirty smudge. He sighted carefully along the barrel of the revolver and fired again.

The bullet kicked up dust a good five

feet from the target and he grunted in disgust. His round, freckled face was grim as he began to reload. A man had to know how to fire a gun in this country, and since he was the only man left in the family he was determined to learn. But the learning was hard and slow.

Besides, his mother hated firearms, and he had to sneak away to the lonely security of the malpais before he could practice.

Once more he sighted along the short barrel, but his finger froze on the trigger as he heard a stone clatter down the canyon side behind him. Slowly, soundlessly, he turned to see Nate Byers climbing the rocks to where he lay. Nate climbed slowly, his stiff boots with their high heels and jagged spurs making him pick his footing carefully. Nate was his mother's foreman, and Nate must have followed him from the ranch.

"Hi, Bantam!" the long-legged, grizzly foreman greeted him.

The boy's face was sober. There was no smile of welcome.

"Hello, Nate," he replied briefly.

NATE'S face was sun-weathered and creased with worry as he looked down on the boy. He knew just about everything there was to know about cattle, and how to fight Comanches and Apaches, but handling a boy was a delicate proposition. He shifted uneasily on his high heels.

"Yore ma's sick, worryin' about yuh," he said at last.

"Bantam" Davidson's blue eyes were bland as he looked up at the big cowhand. "I'm all right."

"Yep," Nate answered. "I know that, and so do you. But yore ma's not so shore."

It was hard to decide what he should do. Bantam knew that his mother wouldn't like what he was doing. But women's ways were different from men's ways. A man had to learn to shoot, and in this wild country make his own law.

It was hard to decide. He didn't want to worry his mother, but he could never forget how his father had looked when they brought him home for the last time, lying across his saddle with his fingertips trailing in the dust, making snake-tracks beside those of his horse.

In his heart Bantam knew that the big rancher, Jackson Miller, had been responsible in some way for that tragedy. Miller had been cleaning out the nesters one by one until his father had shown the nesters how to use windmills.

With the windmills Miller's water-rights were no longer a matter of life or death to a man's herd. For all Jackson Miller's smiles and easy words the boy had sensed the bitter hatred that lay between the two men.

"So"—Nate looked carefully at the clumsy target—"this is how yuh spend yore afternoons."

There was a note of defiance in Bantam's voice. "Yes."

"Yuh any good at it?"

Bantam looked down shamefacedly. He hated to admit he couldn't hit what he aimed at, hated to admit it to Nate who could toss a silver dollar in the air, draw, aim and plug it before it was through spinning.

His emotion made his voice break awkwardly when he answered, "No." Flushing, he admitted, "I can't even hit it at all most times."

Nate nodded sympathetically. "Takes a lot of practice."

The sympathy was hardest of all to take. Bantam felt tears stinging his eyes. He was only eleven and sometimes the difficulty of trying to be a man was a well-nigh insupportable burden.

But the big foreman didn't seem to notice. He hitched his levis at the knees and sat down on a convenient rock.

"Yuh keep at it long enough," he drawled, "and yuh'll hit it every time."

That was what Bantam had been hoping Nate would say. He couldn't keep his round, freckled face grim any longer. He couldn't help smiling. Anyhow it looked as if Nate was not going to give him the devil for practicing with his dad's gun.

"Honest," Bantam exclaimed, "do yuh think I'll learn?"

"Shore." Nate took tobacco from his pocket and rolled a cigarette. "I suppose yuh save all yore pocket money for shells?"

Bantam grinned. "Yep."

Smoke spiraled slowly upward from Nate's cigarette in the still, dry air. He jerked a work-worn thumb toward the target.

"I suppose yuh call that thing Miller?"

The reserve that had broken down under Nate's friendliness came back. Like water bursting a dam, the boy's expression of grim determination flooded back in his young face.

"Yuh don't have to answer," Nate burst out. "I can see the answer plain all over your face."

Bantam was scrambling to his feet. There were some things he would not listen to.

But Nate was quick, too. "Not as I blame yuh," he said easily. "If I was yore age and in yore boots I might be doin' the same thing."

Bantam stopped tentatively, still poised for flight.

"Yuh didn't get called Bantam for nothin', yuh know," Nate went on. "I'd expect a boy like you to show fight. But this ain't the way to do it."

HE WONDERED what Nate was getting at. In the old days, before his father's death, they had been fast friends. Nate had taught him to ride, to throw a loop, to read Indian sign. With his dad gone Nate was about the only friend he had left.

"Why?" he questioned.

"A man has to know how to shoot—I'm not against that. But a man has to be mighty shore before he takes the law in his own hands. I guess, Bantam"—the old cowhand looked at the boy affectionately—"the trouble is I haven't talked to yuh enough. I should've done it, man to man."

Nate Byers, who had a sure hand with cowcritters and steers, who knew Indian sign and Indian ways, had touched sure ground in handling a boy. It had been Bantam's injured pride that he was still treated as a boy when a man's responsibilities were being thrust upon him that had driven him into the hills daily for target practice.

"It wasn't Miller that killed yore pa," Nate said. "Though it was Miller's gun that done it." He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully.

Bantam sat down on a bare rock beside the old foreman. He nursed his father's .44 lovingly in his hands. He looked doubtfully at Nate.

"Miller had no reason to be fond of yore pa." Nate leaned back comfortably and lit another cigarette. "Yuh're right about 'em hatin' each other. Miller wanted more land and he had water rights down there." Nate pointed to the plain below. "When yore pa put in those windmills it was the end of Miller's dream of ownin' the whole country."

Bantam interrupted, "He hated Pa."

Nate nodded complacently. "He did. But he didn't kill him. Miller and yore pa and some of the other ranchers down there was makin' a posse to round up some Comanche rustlers. We ran into a bit of trouble and there was some firin'. Miller's plumb scared of Indians. Can't shoot straight around 'em. Yore pa was the best shot and when his gun was empty Miller gave him his revolver. It was all right first couple of shots, then it backfired—exploded. It was an accident."

The boy listened carefully. His mother had told him something like this. But the old fear and suspicion of Jackson Miller died slowly.

"He might've done somethin' to that gun," he suggested.

It pleased Bantam when Nate nodded in agreement. "He might've. But nobody will ever be shore. Yuh can't kill a man on such grounds. Beside," the old cowhand added gently, "remember what the Good Book says: 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord!' "

Bantam Davidson felt very small sitting there on the side of the canyon with the plains stretching out before him and the malpais lying behind him. He still hated Jackson Miller with every atom of his being, but like Nate said, you couldn't kill a man on those grounds.

Nate started talking again, in that slow, easy drawl of his that was at once so strong and so comforting.

"It's dangerous for yuh up here. These mountains are still Indian country. I'll tell yuh what I'll do. I'll speak to yore ma, and we'll set up a target behind the corral and I'll teach yuh to shoot proper."

The boy's face glowed. The expression of grim determination that had been so out of place on the round, freckled face vanished as if it had never been.

"Honest?" he flashed boyishly.

"On one condition," Nate cautioned.

So completely had the big cowhand won the boy's confidence that the child's

face did not even darken.

"Name it!" Bantam cried eagerly.

Nate smiled. "Promise yuh won't ever come up here in Comanche territory again."

"Shore." Bantam grinned. "I won't have to if yuh do what yuh say."

"All right. Let's shake on it." Nate held out his big, calloused hand and Bantam's small, grimy paw disappeared in it. . . .

WHATEVER it was that Nate said to Bantam's mother the boy never knew. He only knew that the target was set up behind the corral and nothing was ever said against shooting.

The practice time after chores were done gave a new meaning to Bantam's life. He tried to work side by side with the big foreman. He rode range, and lugged water and he seemed to grow by inches. His wrists seemed to spring out of his sleeves, leaving the cuffs halfway to his elbows. His legs kept shooting out of his levis until he had hardly enough leg left to stuff into his boots.

His face became sun-weathered and his muscles lean and wiry. The hand that held the big .44 no longer trembled with strain. Now he hit the target every time, not once in thirty times.

In the afternoon when the shadows began to lengthen across the dry earth Bantam was out shooting. Nate, watching him, would grin and shake his head.

"Yore pa'd be proud of yuh," he observed casually as he watched the boy practicing his draw. "Yuh're comin' up a man—all four-foot-eleven of yuh."

Bantam laughed away his embarrassment, but he was pleased. Since the day on the edge of the malpais he and Nate had been steadily growing closer. Only when Miller came to the ranch did the boy's face assume the old expression of tension.

Miller came often. He would ride a big, black stallion into the ranch yard, doff his hat to Mrs. Davidson, joke with Nate, and pat Bantam patronizingly on the head.

"Hiya, kid," he'd boom noisily. "Great job yuh're doin' here."

Then he would ride off in a cloud of dust leaving Bantam seething with humiliation and hatred. He always thought Jackson Miller came riding over just to see whether his mother was ready to give up the struggle to keep the ranch. Bantam thought he visited the other ranchers to see how they were getting along and to gloat over their misfortunes.

There were plenty of misfortunes. The Comanches were raiding stock that summer. Driving cow critters off into the mountains, reducing the herds. The reduced herds straggled, and strays wandered off by themselves. It meant constant riding to keep the herds together.

Nate was tireless in trying to keep the stuff together, and Bantam rode with him. They would follow tracks for miles over the plain just to gather up a few head that a year or so before no one would have bothered about.

They were riding trail on a small bunch one day when the tracks suddenly split. Nate dismounted to examine the tracks.

"Ain't natural for 'em to act that way," he muttered.

Bantam watched him carefully studying the tracks. "Any sign of Indian?"

Nate shook his head. "I guess they're just ornery."

Watching him, Bantam guessed what he had in mind. He wanted to send Bantam after one bunch and go after the other one, but he was afraid to send the boy out alone. It seemed to Bantam like a kind of test. If Nate told him to go it would prove he was really capable of doing a man's work. He waited breathlessly.

Nate studied the tracks, took off his Stetson, scratched his head, climbed into the saddle and down again.

"Think yuh could follow that bunch?" he finally said.

Bantam drew a long breath. He had made the grade. His eagerness showed in his face.

"Shore," he answered evenly, though his heart was in his throat.

Grinning, Nate nodded good-by. He was learning boy lore as he had learned cattle and Indian lore. Then he turned his back and rode swiftly after the straying bunch.

But Bantam sat for a long time staring after him. His heart beat rapidly. Nate had trusted him as he would trust a man. He turned his horse's head and spurred him along the dusty tracks.

The trail led zigzag across the plain then turned sharply toward the malpais and

Comanche land. Bantam reined in, slowing his horse to a walk. He wondered if Nate's prohibition against going into Indian territory extended to abandoning the search for the strays.

Then he saw a fresher trail cross the old one he was following. He got down to examine it. There were the same tracks, for he saw the print of the same cleft hoof on the old cow. The strays had doubled back on themselves. The new tracks were fresh. The bunch of strays would be only a little ahead of him.

NEARNESS of the cattle decided him. Nate would understand. If he trusted him to do a man's work, then he trusted him to use a man's judgment. Bantam rode ahead on the new trail. It led him straight into the familiar canyon where he had taken his secret target practice.

The cow critters he was looking for were wandering around over the dry stones acting mighty unhappy at the predicament they had got themselves into. It was a few minutes work to round them up and drive them back down the canyon toward the plain.

Then Bantam saw the rude target he had constructed still standing. The temptation was too much for him. He wanted to see if he could hit it now. It looked so easy, where before it had been so difficult. He swung out of saddle.

It was just here on this big, sun-baked rock that he had lain and tried to hit the figure that roughly approximated a man. The big .44 that had belonged to his father was strapped to his leg. He drew and fired.

This time the bullet did not kick up dust five feet from the target. It sped true and a clean chip flew off just where a man's heart would have been.

Bantam grinned. He forgot that Nate had told him not to come here, he forgot the stray bunch in the canyon below, he forgot all about it being Comanche territory. He fired again and again. All the times he had missed that cursed target had to be avenged. He was so intent that he did not hear the soft step behind him.

"Practicin'?" a voice almost breaking with anger asked.

Bantam whirled to face Jackson Miller. The ready smiles and easy talk were all gone. Miller felt no necessity of acting in front of the boy.

"I saw yuh sneak in here." Miller seized the revolver, twisting Bantam's wrist violently. "That thing,"—he pointed to the target—"looks too much like a man for my likin'." His voice grated harshly and his eyes were evil slits in his hard face.

Bantam stood disarmed, his lean young wrists sticking out of his sleeves, his legs looking too long for his body. He said nothing. But he was wondering what had brought Miller into Indian territory when his fear of Indians was almost pathological. Perhaps it was the calm inscrutability of his youthful, freckled face that goaded Miller to fury.

Deliberately Jackson Miller emptied the bullets from the cylinder of Bantam's old .44.

"I'll teach yuh to play with guns," he muttered thickly. He stuck the barrel of Bantam's gun into a rock crack and threw his entire weight against it. The hard granite of the malpais held the gun like a vise.

It was a good thing Miller was so intent on what he was doing that he didn't see the boy's face. Everything Bantam was thinking was reflected there. Nate had said it was Miller's gun that had backfired, killing his father. No one could prove Miller had tampered with his gun. But now Bantam knew what had happened. He was seeing with his own eyes the way the thing had been done!

Miller was pinching the muzzle of the gun so slightly that nothing was visible—unless you were actively looking for treachery. Besides, Miller would have got his own gun back and destroyed the evidence later. But he had tampered with that gun!

Miller reloaded Bantam's revolver and handed it back.

"Here, go ahead and play with it," he taunted, smiling his easy smile. "Go ahead," he urged. "Hurry up. Mebbe yore shootin's already drawn Indians. I want to get out of here. Go on—play sheriff!"

Bantam stood quietly spinning the cylinder of his revolver. Miller was standing right in front of him. He could take a chance. Maybe he'd kill Miller, and maybe he'd die himself. There was no telling how much the muzzle had been pinched. Or

he could keep the revolver.

He wondered what Nate would say when he saw it. He looked defiantly at Miller, and in the man's eyes he read that he would never get out of that canyon alive to show his revolver to anyone.

Nate was probably chasing strays all over Arizona. When Bantam didn't show for supper, they'd start looking for him and they'd find him dead in the malpais. Nate would think he'd disobeyed him. His death would be "accidental", like his father's had been.

MILLER looked about uneasily.

"Hurry up! Them Comanches'll be gettin' here."

Even as he spoke he heard the whine of a rifle bullet, and a rock behind them scattered chips. Miller dived for shelter, his face distorted with fear. "Comanches!" he yelled.

Catching the contagion of Miller's terror, Bantam crouched beside him.

Jackson Miller was already firing recklessly from behind cover. Bantam knew he was terrified. His fear of Indians was no pose. Beads of perspiration stood out on his brow—he had lost his head. He had forgotten everything but his overwhelming fear of the unseen Comanches he imagined lurked behind every rock and ledge in the canyon.

Bantam listened intently. There were no answering shots; only the echo of Miller's firing in that canyon. Bantam's fear left him. Maybe this was his chance to get away.

He began to inch back slowly.

Then the hammer of Miller's revolver clicked on an empty chamber.

He thrust the useless weapon into Bantam's hand.

"Reload!" he commanded savagely.

Bantam laid down his useless .44, and began to reload. His hand was steady. In seconds Miller had emptied his other gun. He reached back and his fingers closed over Bantam's gun.

"No!" the boy shouted, forgetting his hatred of Miller. He grabbed the barrel of the gun.

Brutally, Miller smashed his fist down on the boy's head. Stunned by the pain, Bantam let go the revolver and cradled his aching head in his arms.

There was an explosion close beside him and he tasted the harsh, acrid gunpowder on his lips.

Beside him Jackson Miller was gasping out his life in the sunshine.

The canyon was as silent as death.

Bantam tossed the revolvers out before the rock. Quick Indian eyes would see them.

Then he rose unsteadily and walked into the open.

There was no sound in the canyon. No Indian head, diabolically painted, rose from behind cover. Far below in the bottom of the canyon he could see the bunch of strays he had come to find. The horses had bolted when Miller began to fire, and Bantam could see them, too, far below.

A stone clattered down the canyon side in the unearthly silence, and he saw Nate Byers, rifle in hand, awkwardly climbing the rocks.

Nate listened while Bantam told his story, his head a little to one side, his sun-weathered face creased with worry.

"I found my bunch," Nate explained, "and came after you. I saw Miller sneakin' up behind yuh. Saw him take yore gun."

"He pinched the barrel," Bantam said quickly.

Nate's rifle lay in the crook of his arm. He rolled a thin cigarette and lit it in cupped hands.

The smoke rose blue and straight in the still air.

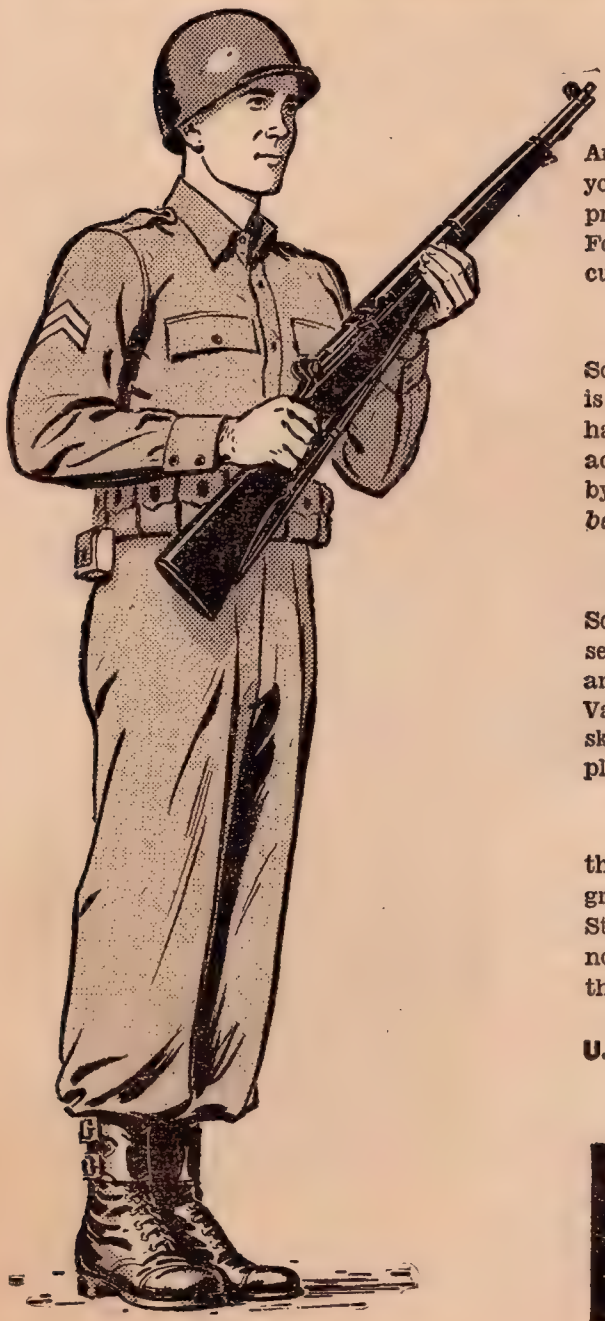
"I saw him. That's why I fired that one shot—way over his head. I only wanted him to know he had witnesses. I didn't know he'd go loco. It's like the Good Book says, 'Vengeance is mine'."

They rode slowly back across the plain, driving the strays before them. Bantam saw the windmills standing stark against the deep blue sky. For the first time since his father died he could look at them without feeling they were the cause of all the trouble. There were a lot of them. Like monuments to the sort of man his father had been, the kind of man who was bringing a new and better life to the West.

"I guess Pa was plenty proud of 'em," Bantam said.

"Yep." Nate smiled. "But not so proud as he would have been of you. When a man has a son who can carry on his work, then he can shore enough be proud."

"I'M PROUD TO BE IN THE COMBAT FORCES!"



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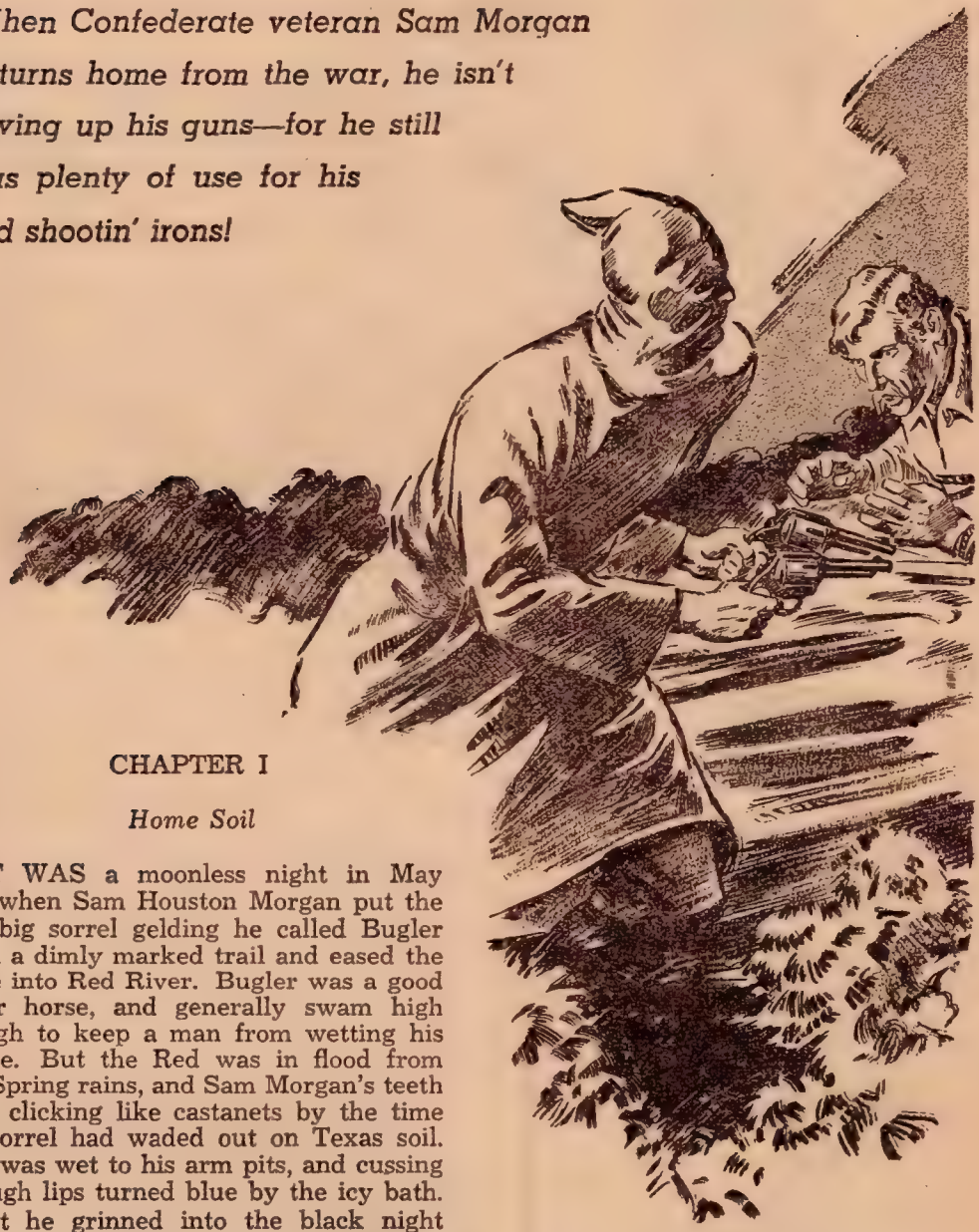
TEXANS STANDING PAT!

by Lee Bond

When Confederate veteran Sam Morgan returns home from the war, he isn't giving up his guns—for he still has plenty of use for his old shootin' irons!



CHAPTER I

Home Soil

IT WAS a moonless night in May when Sam Houston Morgan put the big sorrel gelding he called Bugler down a dimly marked trail and eased the horse into Red River. Bugler was a good water horse, and generally swam high enough to keep a man from wetting his saddle. But the Red was in flood from late Spring rains, and Sam Morgan's teeth were clicking like castanets by the time the sorrel had waded out on Texas soil. Sam was wet to his arm pits, and cussing through lips turned blue by the icy bath.

But he grinned into the black night even as he cussed for he was thinking

Flame and smoke and thunder blasted from Sam Morgan's guns and the hooded men began to drop

about riding on solid Texas ground again. That meant that he was home for the first time since he had quit the Rail M ranch, yonder to the South, and joined the Confederate army at the outbreak of the war between the states.

"Ho, Boy!" he said, low-voiced. "You and me'll stop here, I've just naturally got to feel good old Texas under my big feet! Also, you jug-head, wallowin' around out in the current the way you did, give me a duckin', and I'll have to twist the water out of my duds."

Sam Morgan stepped out of the saddle, laid down a slicker-wrapped bundle that held two pistols, powder flask and bullet pouch, then pulled off his bullhide boots. A few moments later he stood stripped and shivering, wringing water from his clothes. He shivered worse than ever

when he had to crawl back into the wet garments. He thought ruefully that it was a fine piece of business, when a man did not dare build a fire to thaw the chill out of his bones.

For Sam Morgan could take no chances on a fire. Texas was overrun by conniving, thieving carpet-baggers, who had grabbed control of the state, kicked out all honest officials, and were just naturally making Texas unsafe for Texans to live in. According to some reports Sam had heard, the carpet-bagger rulers had installed as State Police, the worst bunch of cutthroats the Southwest had ever known, and they were letting those police run hog-wild. There were stories of hooded night-riders who swooped down on any Texan who complained about the exorbitant taxes or the behavior of the police, and shot or hanged where they found him.

Sam Morgan did not know whether to believe these rumors or not, but they could be true, and he was cautious. He grinned into the night when he started walking out through the bottoms, leading his horse.

BY DAYLIGHT, he was thinking, he ought to be back at the Rail M, where he had been born and raised. His parents had died when he was only three, leaving him to the care of two much older brothers, Dave and Tom.

"Colonel Dave and Major Tom," Sam chuckled. "I'll bet that pair are as strutty as tom gobblers."

He sobered suddenly, reminded of something he wished he did not have to remember. When the war between the states started, Sam had been eighteen years old, and man grown. But to Dave and Tom, he was still only a kid, and they made that plain when they told him to stay home and help lanky old Buck Wicker, the Rail M ramrod, run the ranch. That had made Sam so mad he had pulled out and joined the Army so fast he was actually wearing the gray before either Dave or Tom got into uniform, since they had spent time wangling commissions instead of going into service as enlisted men.

Which was all right, their getting commissions. Sam had never felt that it was anything but right, since Dave had been forty at the time, and Tom thirty-seven. They had gone in as lieutenants, and Sam had been proud and happy each time he heard of either of them getting a promotion.

Sam Morgan wanted to return to his home as rapidly as his stout horse could take him, and yet there was a dread of going in his heart. When he got there he would be just the "Morgan kid" again, a happy-go-lucky youngster who was never on the inner circle when it came to the business of operating the vast ranch. Dave and Tom would josh him the way they always had whenever he wanted to take a full partner's responsibility in the ranch affairs. They would silence him if he got insistent or had opinions in any matter that came up.

"That's the way I'm afraid Dave and Tom will act," Sam muttered gravely. "But that's not the way I want it."

He walked until he was thoroughly warmed, and his clothes were beginning to dry, then mounted and set Bugler south at a steady pace. He stopped once that night to rest the sorrel for a couple of hours, then pushed on. When dawn came, he was jogging along the east side of what was known locally as Terrapin Hill, grinning widely despite the weariness that was in him.

Down the shallow valley, a half mile distant, lay the sprawling Rail M ranchhouse, and he could see smoke lazing up from the cook-shack chimney, and saw men moving around the long bunkhouse as he approached. He was within a hundred yards of the main corrals, starting to skirt past the enclosure along the west side, when a man stepped out of a brush patch, leveling a rifle at him.

"Hold it, mister!" came the crisp command.

Sam reined his horse in abruptly, the grin fading from his lips. He studied the slim, hatchet-faced man before him, seeing the beady dark eyes that looked boldly at him over the leveled rifle, rake him over in quick glances.

"The last time I had any information on it, this was the Rail M ranch, owned by the Morgan brothers," Sam said slowly.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" the man asked bluntly.

"I'm Sam Morgan, and I figured I was comin' home," Sam said quietly. "Any objections?"

"So you're the brother them other two are always yappin' about, are you?" the rifleman sneered. "Well, shed them guns you've got belted on, Morgan. Me and the other troopers are the only men allowed to carry guns on this ranch. Unbuckle your belt and pass me them pistols."

'Troopers?" Sam Morgan echoed the words. He could feel a prickling of anger that he tried to control.

"I'm Stoke Varney of the State Police!" the hatchet-faced man snapped. "Pass over them guns, Texan, and don't give me no more lip."

Sam Morgan's blocky shoulders slumped as if he were resigned, and the lids pinched down slowly over blue eyes that were bloodshot from fatigue. He very carefully loosened the buckle of the belt that held his two cap-and-ball pistols. Then, holding the ends of the belt in his right hand, walked his horse forward. He leaned out of the saddle, lifting the gun-weighted belt out towards Stoke Varney, who gave him a sneering grin.

Varney tucked the rifle under his skinny left arm and stepped forward, reaching for the belt and holstered guns that Sam had extended.

"So you think a Morgan hasn't the right to pack guns on his own land, do you?" Sam's voice was almost gentle.

BUT there was nothing gentle in the way his right foot suddenly lashed out. The toe of his heavy boot caught Stoke Varney in the face, and Sam saw the red flash of blood as Varney flipped over backwards, howling at the top of his lungs.

Sam slid out of the saddle. Varney had dropped the rifle, but he now was trying to pull a cap-and-ball pistol from a holster at his right thigh as he jumped to his feet. Sam hit him full in the mouth with a straight left that sent him sprawling again, then buckled his own guns back around his middle and walked over to where Varney was trying groggily to pull himself to a sitting position.

"Up you come, fellow!" Sam said without heat, and took hold of Varney's shirt front, yanking him to his feet.

Varney cursed groggily and pawed at the holstered gun, but Sam Morgan shook him savagely, pulled the gun out of his holster and tossed it away. Sam was aware of excited voices drawing near, and glanced up to see four men rushing towards him with drawn guns. He spun Stoke Varney around, and, using him as a shield, drew and leveled a pistol at the heavily armed men.

"Halt!" Sam bawled the order sternly, and watched the four men skid and push and fight to keep their feet as they obeyed the command.

"Shad, you and the boys give me a hand here!" Stoke Varney squawked. "This is the kid brother them other two stiff-necked Morgan Texans have been talkin' about. He hit me when I wasn't lookin', Shad, honest he did."

"Are you gents some more examples of the State Police?" Sam asked in a slow drawl.

"We're State Police, Morgan!" a big, bull-necked man said harshly. "I'm Lieutenant Shad Nickerson, in charge here at the ranch. Stoke Varney and these other three men are troopers and they take my orders. Put up that gun and behave yourself, or I'll waltz you down to Little Mound and toss you in jail."

Sam Morgan grinned suddenly, but there was no mirth in the cold depths of his blue eyes. Lieutenant Shad Nickerson and the three men with him were unquestionably hard-case hombres, yet Sam had them flat-footed, and knew it. They wouldn't start a gunfight so long as he had their scrawny *companero* for a shield, and Sam deliberately cocked the pistol he was leveling at them.

"You're confused, Nickerson," he said slowly. "You, and the three men with you, are the ones to think about puttin' up your guns. Throw the weapons down."

Nickerson's face turned red. For a moment his bloodshot yellow eyes locked with Sam's cold blue stare. Nickerson's glance shifted, and he looked at his three men who were watching him with uneasy expectancy.

"He's got us cold, Shad," said a short, fat man with a shrug. "If we tie into the fool, we'll likely hurt Stoke."

"His brothers will take the starch out of him," a tall, hump-shouldered tough said gruffly. "They warned us the fool kid might make some kind of a play if he showed up here and run into us before they had a chance to set him straight on

how things are."

"Holster your guns, men," Nickerson said slowly. "As for you, Morgan, I'll attend to you later. I'll give your brothers a chance to—"

"I said throw those guns down, not holster them!" Sam's voice cut in sharply.

A stocky redhead, who had started to shove his pistol into holster, swore suddenly, flipped the gun up and cocked it. The gun in Sam Morgan's hand roared, and the red-head spun off balance, a howl of pain and alarm on his lips as he lost his footing and fell.

"Next?" Sam's voice droned through the echoes of his guns. Suddenly there was fear in the three pairs of eyes that watched him cock the smoking pistol again. Lieutenant Shad Nickerson dropped his pistol, and his two companions followed suit with considerable haste.

"You cooked your own goose, Morgan, when you shot Tuck Wilson!" Lieutenant Nickerson said hoarsely.

"We'll see about that," Sam said evenly. "Right now, you three turn around and head for the house, yonder. That goes for you, too, Wilson. Get up from there and stop playin' 'possum. I put a pistol ball through your arm. It missed the bone, or you wouldn't be tryin' to reach out and get hold of that gun again."

Shad Nickerson swore, glanced down at Tuck Wilson, then hastily kicked a pistol out of Wilson's reach. The redhead sat up, fury in his slanted green eyes as he began cursing Sam Morgan.

"Shut up, and get on your feet, Tuck!" Nickerson ordered. "You evidently ain't hurt much, at that. And if you hadn't tried to throw down on Morgan he wouldn't have winged you, either."

Tuck Wilson got up, left hand gripping the bloodied sleeve of his right arm. He turned around and went slogging towards the bunkhouse, Nickerson and the other two following him. Sam Morgan gave Stoke Varney a shove that sent him staggering after the other four, then picked up his sorrel's reins with his left hand and followed them, a puzzled and uneasy something taking hold of his mind.

Where were the Rail M cowhands? Why were these gun-hung hoodlums who called themselves State Police here, claiming to be in charge of the ranch? Where were Colonel Dave and Major Tom Morgan?

CHAPTER II

Carpet-Bagger Rule

VAGUE apprehensions were deviling Sam's uneasy mind as he marched along behind the five disarmed and darkly angry men. They were nearing the bunkhouse, and he was on the point of warning them to keep right on marching down towards the huge ranchhouse when he saw the two men step out of the tall gate that opened into the patio behind the old ranchhouse.

"Dave! Tom!" The names were a hoarse whisper, slipping unbidden from Sam's lips.

He halted, aware that Shad Nickerson and his troopers had stopped. Sam's amazed eyes were on the two tall, white-haired men who walked with such obvious military bearing up the path towards him. They were Dave and Tom, all right. Sam knew that with a kind of shock. Yet they were certainly not the brothers he remembered, for these men were thin to the point of gauntness, their faces drawn and sunken as if from great age, and their hair was as white as newly milled flour.

"It's about time you two hustled out!" Shad Nickerson greeted the two gaunt men sourly. "Here's your blasted young brother you're always talkin' about. Quick! Tell him how the land lays. He shot one of my men, and I reckon you two know what that means. Talk sense into that fool kid while I patch up Tuck Wilson's arm. And have that kid disarmed and ready to hand over to me when I get up to the house."

Sam gulped, forced a grin to his lips as Dave and Tom shambled forward. The greeting he tried to utter choked in his throat, for his brothers looked so old and tired and beaten he scarcely knew them. And the way they just looked at him, their black eyes dull and trouble-shadowed, scared him a little.

"We'll take the youngster in tow, Lieutenant," Tom said. "Sorry this happened."

"Come along, Sam," Dave said wearily. "Tom and I have been afraid something would go wrong, if you just came home unannounced. Couldn't you have written

to us, let us know what you've been doing since the war's end?"

"Quit lookin' so put out, sonny!" Lieutenant Shad Nickerson glared at Sam. "What did you expect, a feast on the fatted calf? Git on to the house with these other Johnny Rebs. I'll see you later, so don't get notions about wanderin' off."

"Come along, Sam!" Tom said almost sharply when Sam half turned, blue eyes flashing as he looked at Nickerson.

Sam holstered his pistol, dug powder flask and bullet pouch out of a saddle bag, and grinned a cold, mocking grin at Lieutenant Nickerson, who swore suddenly and took a step towards him.

"Go patch up that man of yours, Nickerson," Sam said grimly. "And don't worry about me runnin' off. I'll be at the house, yonder, when you want me."

Dave got hold of Sam's right arm, and Tom took his left arm in thin hands that were surprisingly strong. They marched him rapidly down the path and through the patio gate, and Sam was amazed to discover that they were both shaking with silent laughter. They hustled him into the big house, and suddenly they were thumping his brawny shoulders, letting their laughter come out in dry, harsh sounds that made him shudder.

"Dave! Tom!" Sam's voice was harsh. "What the devil goes on here?"

Dave laughed shrilly. "You rambunctious young scamp, you've tossed the fat in the fire, and that's no mistake. But it was almost worth it, youngster. You disarmed those rapscallions and actually shot one of them. Sam, won't you ever grow up, boy?"

"I'll say he put the fat in the fire!" Tom said, sobering. "Dave, this means the end of our hopes of getting the cattle out of here. Nickerson and those men of his will watch us more closely than ever, now that they know we have a fire-breathing brother."

Sam frowned up at his two older brothers. "Will one of you tell me what this is all about?"

"Texas isn't like you remember it as being, Sam," Dave said gravely. "Shad Nickerson and those others out there are State Police, put here to see that no stock is moved from this range. Tom and I are badly behind with the unbelievable amount of taxes assesed against us by the carpet-baggers who are in power here now. Because some Texas ranchmen had the good sense to gather their cattle and get out of the State before the stock could be seized for back taxes, the carpet-baggers are tightening down, watching all big outfits like this one to see that no stock is moved."

MOROSELY Tom nodded his head as he took up the story. He frowned at Sam.

"But Dave and I have been gathering Rail M cattle on the sly," he said. "We have a couple of thousand head, button, hidden over in the rough hills east of Squatter Valley. That's about all we can round up without Nickerson and his men noticing that the cattle are thinning out, although the range is still badly overstocked. We have a dozen good men camped out over there with those cattle, and meant to make a run for Red River with the herd just as soon as the ground firms up after these late rains we've had."

"So you gathered a few of the cattle and meant to make a run for the Red," Sam said slowly. "But why? And where would you go?"

"We gathered all we felt safe in gathering, Sam," Tom said gravely. "We meant to save those two thousand head from the carpet-baggers' greed that is ruining men like us. On the Smoky River, up in Kansas, there's a block of range we can lease. So—"

"So since when did a handful of carpet-baggers and a batch of toughs who call themselves State Police get to scarin' Texans into runnin' out of Texas?" Sam cut in sharply. "Carpet-baggers are holdin' the reins right now, and from what I've heard they are power-drunk, taxin' the people to ruin, and sure ridin' high. But Texas is for Texans, and if we stick it out, use our heads, and put enough bluff behind the bob-tailed flush we've been dealt, we can clean house and not lose too much skin in the showdown."

"Youngster, there's no point in trying to get the whole picture over to you in a few words," Dave said gravely. "Just calm down, strip those guns off your thighs, and behave yourself. Tom and I will have to be more cautious than ever, for a while now. Nickerson and his men aren't too brainy, so perhaps we can outwit them

and get that herd across the Red yet."

Sam grinned ruefully. "In other words, Dave, you and Tom still think I'm a kid, who wouldn't have sense enough to understand the setup even if you took the bother to explain it to me."

"Don't get huffy at us, youngster," Tom said quietly.

"I'm not huffy at anybody," Sam declared. "I got a plenty of fightin' durin' the war, and sure don't want trouble that I can keep from havin'. But I won't hang up these guns. I won't run one inch on Texas soil from the carpet-baggers and their so-called State Police, and I won't see the Rail M taken over by the plunderers on the flimsy excuse that we're behind with taxes."

"Sam, don't be an idiot!" Dave said sharply. "You behave yourself, youngster, or you'll cause Tom and me a lot more trouble than we deserve to have."

"You'll be arrested and taken to town for shooting that Tuck Wilson fellow!" Tom said bluntly. "Dave and I may be able to get you out of this scrape, but not if you make any more trouble."

"Nickerson won't bother about arrestin' me," Sam said with a dry chuckle. "And he won't crowd his luck too much when I tell him I don't aim to hang up my guns. Or have the carpet-baggers passed a law forbiddin' Texans to pack guns?"

"Nickerson ordered that none of us on the Rail M were to go armed, so Tom and I cooperated rather than have him watching us too closely," Dave said sharply. "But what gave you the quaint idea that Nickerson doesn't intend to arrest you for shooting one of his men and, from what I saw, beating up another?"

"Nickerson and that bunch with him are pretty much like a lot of other galoots who like to brag about their toughness." Sam gave a shrug. "They won't lug me off to jail for the simple reason that they'd have to tell their superiors what I did to them. And Nickerson won't raise too much fuss about me wearin' these guns because there's no law against my wearin' them, and he has sense enough to know he can't just make up his own laws as he goes along."

They had been walking along a broad hallway, and were turning now through a deep arch into the vast living room Sam had known from childhood. He stopped very suddenly, sharp eyes sweeping over the untidy place that was gloomy because the heavy curtains were pulled across the windows.

HE WONDERED what had become of the wives of Dave and Tom, and their children.

"Say, this looks like a regular boar's den," he declared. "Where are Julia and Ellen?"

"Our families are in San Diego, where they're a lot safer than they would be here, Sam," Tom said quietly. "Ellen is anxious to return, and little Rose Anne fusses constantly. She's homesick. Dave's Julia and their two boys are just as bad. But with men like Nickerson and those others on the ranch, and hundreds of others like them swaggering through the streets of every town in Texas, decent women and their children are not safe here."

"Julia and Ellen aren't here to raise the devil with Tom and me for trying to keep you in line, sprout, so let's get down to cases," Dave chuckled drily. "Shed those guns, now, and let's act sensibly about this matter. Shad Nickerson will certainly arrest you for whipping one of his men and crippling another with a bullet. But if you behave yourself, Sam, perhaps I can talk Ben Romley into quashing the charges Nickerson will make against you."

"Ben Romley?" Sam burst out. "What does that squirrel-faced little horse-thief have to do with it?"

"Sonny, you'll get us all shot by the State Police or hanged by the mysterious night riders if you don't start watching your remarks!" Tom groaned. "Ben Romley is now Captain of the State Police. He uses the sheriff's office and jail at Little Mound, as you will no doubt discover within the next few hours."

"And it is very unhealthy, my fine young firebrand, to even *remember* that Ben Romley was once upon a time a horse-thief." Dave smiled bitterly. "To actually voice such a memory, is about like looking into a barrel of a loaded pistol and pulling the trigger."

"Speakin' of pistols, reminds me," Sam said gravely, and pulled the pistol from which he had fired the shot that had crippled Tuck Wilson.

Sam was aware that his brothers

watched him closely as he walked to a table, laid bullet bag and powder flask down, then began lifting the primers from the unfired charges in his gun. He very quickly re-charged the spent chamber in the pistol, and replaced all primers after that. He pushed the gun back into his holster, and turned on his brothers, who were scowling with mingled uneasiness and disapproval.

"Save your sermons," he said crisply. "These guns of mine stay where they are. If you want me to quit the ranch I'll do that. But I'll not crawl to these men you've let come here and run over you, and I'll take no kind of orders from them."

"You young dunce!" Dave snapped. "Tom and I haven't let anyone run over us! We've strung Nickerson along by pretending to obey his orders, because we don't want him watching too closely. We'll get that herd of cattle on the move in a few days, which is our main concern."

"Move that herd, and you'll play right into Nickerson's hands," Sam said flatly. "I'm surprised, Dave, that you and Tom would fall into a trap like this. Nickerson and his bunch know you've got those cattle all rounded up. You can bet they do. And they'll let you get the herd up towards the Red before they make their play. They'd hit you and your riders like a cyclone, some night, and when the fracas was over you'd be out two thousand head of cattle, in case you lived to tally up the score. The cattle would dissappear into the wilds over in the Indian Territory, and the State Police would put it down on their books as a case of unknown rustlers jumpin' you boys for the cattle."

Dave and Tom were a little pale, their black eyes sharp and hard as they watched their younger brother pull a small, black book from a pocket of his shirt, open it, and look down at the pages that were warped from having been wet.

"What gave you such notions?" Dave asked almost sternly.

"I rode down across the Indian Territory from Kansas, on my way home," Sam said evenly. "There are a lot of tough hombres hangin' out up there, and I talked to a good many of them. They claim the Texans who gather up their cattle and try to get across the Red, mostly don't make it because these State Police vinegaroons aren't passin' up any bets for takin' easy money. Here's a list of Texas men who tried to get out of the state with cattle, and the tough bunch up yonder in Indian country swear that few, if any of them, made it. Look the list over, and you'll recognize some of the brands, just as I did."

CHAPTER III

A Way Out

SAM MORGAN tossed the book to Dave, who caught it, flipped it open, and glanced down at the pages. Dave muttered under his breath, looked up at Sam and started to say something but Tom punched Dave in the side and jerked his head towards the front door. Dave slipped the little book hastily into his pocket just as the front door opened and Lieutenant Shad Nickerson stalked into the room, beefy face screwed into a dark scowl.

"I thought I told you two to take the guns off this cub!" Nickerson snapped at Dave and Tom, jerking a big hand towards Sam.

Shad Nickerson halted on wide-planted boots, pushed a sweat-marked hat back on a mop of yellow hair, and glared at Sam, who was grinning.

Sam said to him: "Wipe that frown off your ugly mug, get the hat off your head any time you're inside this house, and expect a bullet in the stomach if you ever walk in again without botherin' to knock."

Shad Nickerson flushed, set his teeth together so hard lumps of muscle jumped out along his big jaws, and shot an inquiring look at Dave and Tom Morgan, who looked flabbergasted. Nickerson turned his tawny eyes back to Sam, who came towards him, still grinning. Sam reached up, took the hat off Nickerson's head, and handed it to him.

"You're fixin' to get me mad, feller!" Nickerson said hoarsely.

"I'm fixin' to give you trouble, Shad, if you don't gather up those four men you brought here and quit this ranch," Sam retorted. "Even the thievin' carpet-baggers wouldn't back you and Ben Romley in what you're doin', and you know it.

When you get to Little Mound, tell that Ben Romley horse-thief that I know better than to let a herd of Rail M beefs start any place without enough armed men to handle you and the rest of the bunch he's been sendin' out to grab cattle he's scared ranchmen into tryin' to slip out of the state."

Shad Nickerson's jaw sagged, his eyes bulged out slowly as he listened, and suddenly he was backing away from Sam, pale faced. Then he whirled and bolted through the front door.

"What in the name of time, Sam?" Dave's voice was shaky.

"The tough roosters I ran onto up yonder in the Indian country were bragging about the cattle they've been able to get from a certain State Police captain down here who takes the stock off ranchmen who try to sneak across the Red." Sam chuckled. "When you two told me that Ben Romley, our local horse-thief, had become Captain in the State Police, I didn't have to sprain my brains figurin' out who has been sellin' Texas steers to that bunch in the Indian country. I sort of did some guessin' out loud while Shad Nickerson listened, and I reckon the scare he got proves my guesses shot pretty close to the mark."

"The lightnin' will hit us now, you can bet on that!" Tom groaned. "Ben Romley will get scared, and when a man like that is frightened he's dangerous. What'll we do?"

"Let's eat breakfast," Sam suggested brightly. "I'm sure starved."

His brothers almost glared at him, and he was a little sorry when he saw the deep worry in their haunted eyes. But he grinned cheerfully, walked past them and on through the house, going the familiar route to the huge kitchen.

"Feedin' any wanderin' riders this season, cook?" he called gruffly as he stepped into the kitchen.

A gaunt, bald man whirled away from the stove, hawkish face twisting into a scowl, puckered gray eyes snapping angrily. But suddenly the scowl changed swiftly to gladness, and the gaunt oldster was leaping across the room, grinning hugely as he grabbed Sam's husky shoulders and shook him.

"Sam, boy!" old Buck Wicker kept whooping. "Sam, boy!"

"So you've graduated to ranch cook, eh?" Sam gave him a crooked grin. "What's the matter, did these two old maids decide that bein' foreman of the Rail M was a little too rugged for you, Buck?"

BUCK WICKER sobered, shooting a startled glance at Dave and Tom as they halted, faces flushing, eyes sparkling with quick resentment over their brother's remarks. Buck managed to keep the sober expression for maybe twenty seconds, but suddenly his control gave away, and he doubled over, guffawing until tears coursed down his leathery cheeks.

"Two—old—maids!" he gasped, still laughing as he straightened up and looked at Colonel Sam and Major Dave.

"Confound you, Sam, behave yourself," Dave said peevishly. "And you, Buck, get that meat off the fire before it scorches."

"We'll make you think old maids, young squirt, if you aren't a little more careful," Tom growled at Sam, but there was a wry grin kinking his mouth as he spoke, and he turned to the table that had been set in the big kitchen.

Buck Wicker put food and a big pot of hot coffee on the table, then went out the back door. He returned a few moments later, dumped an armload of wood in the box beside the stove, and pulled off the flour-sack apron he had been wearing. He sat down at the table with the three Morgan brothers, scowling darkly as he helped himself to coffee.

"Nickerson and them four things he fetched with him when he showed up here, a month back, are saddlin' up at the corral, Dave," Buck Wicker said. "They've got their duds with 'em, and I seen that frowzy old sot they've been usin' for a cook come out of the cook shack luggin' his personal junk, too. I heard a shot outside somewhere a while ago, but was too busy to go investigate, havin' been promoted, as Sam put it, to the job of cookin', for havin' leanin's towards wantin' to do a little shootin' with a pistol, my own self."

"Oh, you're abused, all right!" Dave Morgan snorted. "But if I hadn't made you pull your horns in, Buck, you'd have been killed by Nickerson and his bunch."

"I noticed that sorrel-topped Tuck Wilson had his arm wrapped up, and that the other fellers were saddlin' a nag for him

to ride," Buck sniffed. "Of course, bein' just a ranch cook, it ain't none of my business what happened, is it?"

"Quit tryin' to make Sam think Dave and me have been runnin' over you, Buck." Tom Morgan smiled wearily. "You're still the ramrod of the Rail M, and will be just as long as the ranch stands. We kept you here at the ranch where we could ride herd on you. Otherwise you'd have buckled on a gun and tied into Nickerson and his bunch."

"Sam rode in and tangled with them hellions, didn't he?" old Buck asked sharply.

Dave and Tom Morgan winced, then Dave, speaking calmly, told fully what had happened. Old Buck Wicker's face was alight with glee, and there was deep pride shining in his sharp eyes as he reached over and pounded Sam's husky shoulder.

"Your Ma didn't christen you Sam Houston Morgan for nothin' boy!" the oldster chortled. "You're a fightin' man, just like the great Sam Houston you was named after. But why in blazes didn't you shoot that Wilson devil 'twixt the eyes instead of just bleedin' his arm a mite?"

"I'm as sick of the sound of shots and the sight of death as Dave and Tom are, Buck," Sam said evenly. "I want no more trouble of any kind, with any man. But we don't always get what we want, I reckon. Anyhow it looks like we'll maybe have trouble on our hands awhile. Texas is for Texans, and we can't let the invadin' arm of carpet-baggers take it away from us, even if we have to fight some to hold what is ours."

He glanced at Dave and Tom, who were looking at him oddly, seemingly pleased as well as surprised with what he had said.

"The carpet-baggers here in Texas and elsewhere through the defeated South are tough, dangerous, and crooked," he went on gravely. "But they are in power, they are drunk from the feel of that power, and they want to keep the reins in their greedy hands. They know that they can not stay on top if they are too raw, and they try to operate under a system that is at least slightly legal, according to their own lights."

"Are you trying to condone the thievery of the rapscallions who have siezed control of this state, Sam?" Dave asked sharply.

"I condem them, Dave, for the blackguards they are," Sam said quickly. "But they're not backin' the play Ben Romley and others like him are makin'. Romley and his kind are in power because the carpet-baggers put them there, certainly. But the 'baggers' would take those men out of power in a mighty big hurry if they savvied what was going on, because Romley and others like him are pulling the raw, brazen things the carpet-baggers know will eventually get them kicked off the throne as rulers."

"You think that's what scared Shad Nickerson when you mentioned that a certain captain of the State Police down here was dealin' with thugs up in the Indian country?" Tom asked his younger brother.

"That's what scared Shad," Sam declared. "He's working hand in glove with Ben Romley, of course. They know what would happen to them if the carpet-baggers who put them in office ever found out about their trickery."

HIS two older brothers shot quick glances of surprise at each other.

"By thunder, Tom, the youngster has something!" Dave Morgan said sharply. "The carpet-baggers who have wangled their way into political power certainly would put a stop to the activities of men like Ben Romley, if they could be shown what their precious State Police are doing."

"Maybe so." Tom shrugged. "But gettin' the crooked politicians after the State Police and other organized bands of thieves and terrorists is somethin' that won't be easy. Denton, for instance, might be a good man to start with. But he'd laugh in the face of any honest Texan who tried to even talk to him."

"Denton?" Sam echoed the name quickly.

"Harve Denton, a Yankee lawyer who drifted in here and was jockeyed into the county attorney's offce by carpet-bagger friends," Dave explained. "He's tried, and I think honestly, to learn the identities of the hooded plunderers who rampage across this county on night raids, now and then. Denton is as crooked and tricky as any other carpet-bagger, but he would hang those hooded murderers as they

deserve if he could find out who they are."

Dave and Tom fell to talking, and Sam, finished with his breakfast, said he wanted to see about the leg-weary sorrel horse he had left out back of the patio.

"Reckon I'll poke along with you, Sam," old Buck Wicker declared, and they left the kitchen, going out into the patio and across to the tall gate in the rear.

"Say, that sorrel of mine is gone!" Sam exclaimed as they went out the patio gate.

"No need to fret," old Buck said with a chuckle. "When I heard a shot out this way, I come out the front of the house and around the outside of the patio. I seen Dave and Tom comin' in this gate with a feller, and noticed the weary sorrel. I took the hoss to the barn, watered him, and give him a feed of grain. I didn't say nothin' about it to your brothers because I didn't recognize you, and they'll rawhide me plenty, if they find that out."

Sam leaned back against the patio wall, letting his eyes roam over the familiar hills and meadows and broad, timbered valleys. He was tired, and he had come here, wanting peace, and wanting to forget the ugly things war had left him remembering all too vividly.

"How bad is it, Buck?" he asked wearily. "I mean this taxation and carpetbaggers and State Police and hooded terrorist thing that is ruining the Texas I left."

"It's so plumb bad that this and every other ranch in the state will fold up unless somethin' can be done," the old ramrod said bluntly. "Dave and Tom done a whale of a job, Sam, scrapin' up enough cash money to keep operatin'. They set a lot of store by the plan they had for slippin' that herd across the Red and sellin' the cattle in Kansas, or maybe leasin' land up there and startin' a new ranch. I could tell that it hit Dave and Tom hard, son, to find out that the herd they've gathered would have been taken away from them before they ever got out of Texas with it."

"If Dave and Tom will quit makin' out that I'm still a kid in three-cornered pants, I'll take all the cattle up the trail to Kansas markets they want me to take, and guarantee that Texas State Police will never lift a hand to stop me," Sam said. "But right now, Buck, I'm so doggoned sleepy I can't even think straight, so I'd better catch up on my rest. While I'm doin' that, you do what you can to get Dave and Tom to savvy that I can help, if they'll only let me."

Sam yawned, shook his head groggily, and went back into the patio, and to the door he had entered with his two brothers after his brush with Shad Nickerson and the other State Police.

Sam got into the big, high-ceilinged bedroom that had always been his own room, sat down on the edge of the old four-poster bed, and tugged off his boots. He put his belt and holstered guns on a stand table, then peeled off his clothes, remembering sleepily that he had not brought his warbag to the house, and that he would have to have it to get a change of clothes. A few moments later he slid gratefully into the bed that had been kept fresh and clean throughout his absence.

CHAPTER IV

Hooded Rascals

LATER Sam Morgan thought grumpily that he must have had all of twenty minutes sleep before Dave or Tom had come to pester him. There was a hand on his shoulder, and a voice kept saying something that did not quite penetrate the sleep that drugged his brain. He opened his eyes, aiming to tell whichever brother it was who was annoying him to get away and let him sleep.

But there was no one standing over his bed. The room was spinning weirdly about, it seemed, bathed in a dull red glow. And there was a hand on his shoulder, all right, a gnarled hand that clung there, trembling and weak, while a husky voice came through the red shadows that weaved and danced in the room.

Sam sat bolt upright, with a kind of hoarse croaking sound. He clutched the thin wrist as the hand slipped away from his shoulder and leaned over to stare at old Buck Wicker, who was on the floor beside the bed. Buck's face was smeared with something wet and dark, and the last bit of sleep left Sam's mind instantly.

"Buck, what the devil!" he gasped, and hopped out of bed, lifting the oldster.

"They shot me, left me for dead," Buck gasped. "They've got Dave and Tom, and they're huntin' you, son. Hide quick, Sam, before them hooded hellions get—"

The oldster's words ended in a weary sigh, and suddenly he was a limp burden in Sam's strong arms.

"The hooded terrorists, eh?" Sam muttered as he laid old Buck gently down upon the bed.

Sam dressed hastily, buckling his pistols on and settling the holsters to his liking. He stepped to the window and looked out, lips tightening gravely. He had slept soundly through the entire day, for it was dark now.

In the yard, perhaps a dozen paces from his window, stood a group of six white-robed men. They had what looked like pillow cases and bleached flour sacks pulled down over their heads, with holes cut so they could see what they were doing.

Four of the hooded night riders held torches that flickered in the night wind, and Sam savvied now where the leaping red light in his room was coming from. On the ground at the feet of the six white-robed, hood-wearing hoodlums lay Dave and Tom, securely bound.

Sam whirled on the balls of his feet when he heard someone coming along the hallway towards his door. He pulled the pistol from his right hand holster, flattened against the wall as the door latch rattled. The door swung open, and a white robed figure stepped inside, jerking to a halt at sign of the recumbent figure on the bed.

The hooded man was raising a drawn pistol when Sam hit him, quickly and hard, then grabbed him before his body hit the floor. He eased the senseless figure down, holstered his gun, and stripped the hood off the man's bleeding head. Sam struck a match, cupped it cautiously in his palms, and let the light beam into the senseless man's face.

"So we meet again," Sam droned, and snuffed the match out.

He had no idea what the man's name was, but he was the tall, hump-backed tough who had been at the ranch that morning with Shad Nickerson and the other State Police. The white robe the man wore was nothing more than a square of bed sheeting, with a hole cut in the middle for the head to be slipped through, letting the cloth drape down, poncho-fashion. Sam Morgan grinned coldly, got the cloth off the tall man, and slipped it on over his own tousled head. He picked up the white hood and donned it, too, then took a cap-and-ball pistol off 'Humpy.'

Steps in the hallway again! Sam jerked to his feet, but knew that his white robes had already been seen when he heard a man's quickening stride.

"You found anything yet, Roy?" a gruff voice asked.

"Sure, take a look," Sam replied, muffling his voice.

Another hooded, white-robed figure was there on the threshold starting in. Sam's right arm, easing through one of the long slits he had found in each side of the white robe he had donned, made a quick chopping motion and the man who had come into the room was suddenly sprawled across Humpy. Sam did not have to strike a match to know his second victim, for he had recognized the voice of Tuck Wilson, the tough redhead he had winged with a bullet that morning.

"A few strips from that white robe you're wearin', you murderin' hellion, ought to keep you and Humpy from wanderin' off until I come back for you," Sam muttered, and squatted on his heels.

A FEW moments later the man Sam thought of as Humpy and the tough Tuck Wilson, were securely bound by stout strips of sheeting. Sam then lashed them together and gagged them both. He stepped to the bed and spoke softly to old Buck Wicker, but got no response. The Rail M ramrod was alive, however, for Sam found his pulse beating steadily. He turned away, stopped long enough beside his prisoners to get a pistol out of the holster on Tuck Wilson's thigh, then moved out into the hallway.

There was yellow lamplight spilling from the arch that led into the living room, and Sam tucked the two captured pistols into the waistband of his pants, drawing the guns from his own holsters, preferring familiar weapons in case he had to do any shooting. But the living room was unoccupied, and Sam went on across it boldly, stepping out the front door to the deep porch.

There were flares out there in the front yard, casting their red, flickering shadows beneath a giant oak shade tree. Sam was startled, thinking that the whole place must be overrun with torch-carrying, hooded killers. Then he saw that the group beneath the big shade tree were the same ones he had seen at the back of the house earlier, for there were six of them here, and they had Dave and Tom with them.

Dave and Tom Morgan were on their feet now, stiff-backed and silent, as they watched a hooded man lower three nooses from a thick oak branch above their heads. The nooses hung high, and the man tied them solidly to the great branch, then scrambled down the leaning bole of the tree to the ground. Sam Morgan moved forward, his arms and gun-filled hands pulled inside the slits of the robe he wore.

"You Morgan's won't have much longer to be thinkin' up yore last words," a muffled voice came from one of the white hoods. "Tuck Wilson and Roy Fleer will be fetchin' that brother of yores along any time now. We'll leave you three swingin' where other Texans can see what will happen to them if they get too big for their britches."

"You're an oaf, Nickerson!" Dave said coldly. "I'd know your voice anywhere, so stop trying to disguise it."

"Know and be danged to you, smart feller!" Shad Nickerson barked angrily. "You sure ain't fixin' to blabber nothin', that's a cinch. That fool ramrod of yores, Buck Wicker, stumbled onto me and the boys out in the brush behind the corral where we was waitin' for good dark to come, so I put a pistol ball through his noggin. Soon as Wilson and Fleer get here with that brother of yores, we'll fix you three Morgans for keeps."

"Let Sam go, Nickerson!" Tom said hoarsely. "He's only a youngster, and there's no reason for you to murder him, too."

"He's the dirty son who messed the whole deal up!" Shad Nickerson growled. "He saw through the game me and Ben Romley and some others are playin', and his is the mouth we've got to shut the tightest. We watched the ranch all day, and know that none of you got away anywhere to do any blabbin'. So— Hey, Roy, what luck? Where's Wilson? Did you find that other Morgan cuss?"

Shad Nickerson's voice had lifted to an excited shout as he saw the tall, white-robed figure come into the far outer fringes of the flickering torchlight. Sam Morgan's arms and gun-filled hands were still beneath the folds of the white robe that fluttered in the night breeze. Sam stopped, watching the stiff way all six of the hooded men stood as it dawned upon them that something was wrong.

COOLLY, Sam marked the position of his two helpless brothers, taking special note of the two hooded figures who were closest to them. And just as coolly as he had sized the situation, he flung his arms from the slits in the robe he wore, and the pistols in his hands blasted flame and smoke and thunder.

The two robed men closest to Sam's brothers went down, their cries of terror and pain mingling with the echoes of his guns. He saw them writhe and roll in the dancing light of dropped flares, and there was neither tension nor haste in him as he swung his smoking guns, lacing shots at the four hooded terrorists who were still on their feet. Bullets came raking at his fluttering white robe like strong fingers, and once he felt the familiar sting of lead that brushed along his flesh without doing real damage.

But Sam Morgan's attention was on Shad Nickerson most of the time. Nickerson had a spitting gun in his fist, and was lunging and weaving constantly, trying his tricky best to use the bodies of his companions for shields. The third hooded killer dropped under Sam's guns, and he saw another one break and run, screaming shrilly as he raced away into the night. Sam's gun kept bucking steadily until the hammers came down on spent primers. But as the last shot roared from his guns, he saw Shad Nickerson lurch drunkenly, then regain his balance, only to pitch over forward. The one hooded man remaining dropped a smoking pistol and shoved his trembling hands high above his head.

"Don't shoot!" he yelled. "Fleer, what's got into you, you fool?"

"Ben Romley!" Dave and Tom Morgan both said in the same sharply surprised breath.

Sam whisked his emptied guns beneath the robe and into holsters, producing one

of the two fully loaded revolvers he had taken from Tuck Wilson and the hump-backed man whose name he now knew to be Roy Fleer. Sam walked forward until he was within reach of Ben Romley, then struck him smartly across the head with the gun. Romley pitched down, senseless, and Sam sighed wearily as he tucked the gun out of sight beneath his robes.

"Fleer, I don't know the meaning of this," Dave Morgan said hoarsely. "But you'll not regret it, man."

"Sam?" Tom's voice was strained. "Fleer, you and that Wilson fellow didn't hurt the boy, did you?"

"We divided him up and ate him, raw," Sam said grumpily, and ripped the hood and the sheet off him, casting the garments aside.

"Sam!" the two older Morgans gasped in the same startled breath.

Sam looked at them, and grinned a little bitterly as he gave his tousled head a rueful shake. He picked up a couple of the sticks that had oil-soaked gunnysack wired to them and stuck the shafts in the soft ground, watching the flares grow brighter.

He took a knife from his pocket and cut the ropes that held his brothers, then handed them each a loaded pistol, and was telling them to ride herd on the crippled terrorists who were moaning on the ground about them, when old Buck Wicker came stalking into the circle of light.

Buck had a double-barreled shotgun in his gnarled hands, and the hammers were eared back to full cock above shiny primers that were set on the nipples. The Rail M ramrod was grinning, but it was a hideous sort of grin, for his leathery face was caked with drying blood that had leaked out of a bullet cut across his scalp.

"I was scrooched down back yonder in the shadders with this scattergun that I keep loaded with turkey shot," Buck cackled. "I seen you tie into them six hooded things, Sam, and I was sure doin' me some tall wonderin'. I kept tellin' myself that it was some kind of a brawl 'tween them hooded devils, and that I'd wait until the odds was whittled down before I taken a hand in the play. I was tellin' myself that it was time I blistered your south end with a load of heavy turkey shot, when blamed if you didn't waltz over and knock that Ben Romley horse-thief a-floppin' with your gun. For a spry kid who shore needs a lot of bossin' around, you do right well when you get into a ruckus, sonny."

Old Buck winked one shining eye as he finished speaking, and Sam couldn't help grinning when he glanced at his two brothers. They were standing there, holding the pistols he had given them, looking thoughtfully at the white-robed cut-throats who were on the ground about them. They both looked up at Sam at the same moment, and there was something so different in their eyes that he knew suddenly he would no longer be just a kid in their estimation.

"What now, Sam?" Dave asked soberly. "We've something of a ticklish job on our hands, explaining this business of the State Police being shot up on our place. How should we handle this mess?"

"Come to think of it, there are two more of the devils around somewhere," Tom said. "Obviously enough, Sam, that Roy Fleer rake came to grief at your hands, or you'd not have got hold of that hood and robe. Did you see anything of Tuck Wilson?"

"Them two are wrapped up in enough pieces of tore-up bed sheet to keep 'em quiet for a century," Buck Wicker laughed. "I woke up layin' on Sam's bed, so I must've made it there and got him stirrin' his stumps before I passed plumb out from this creased noggin'. When I got off the bed and started out of the room, I found Roy Fleer and Tuck Wilson layin' on the floor, hog tied and gagged."

"This is the best break that could have come to Texas and honest Texans," Sam said quietly. "We'll dump whole thing smack in the laps of the carpet-baggers who set up the State Police, and hired these murderin' devils. The carpet-baggers will stew and sweat and cuss and worry, of course. But this forces their hands, puts their stupidity and inefficency right out in broad daylight, where everyone can see it. The State Police will be shouted out of existence by an aroused citizenry, and the carpet-baggers who created the State Police will be thrown out of office by the frightened politicians in Washington. If we work this right, this can be the beginnin' of the end to carpet-bagger rule over Texas!"

Ward's gun roared and the bullet tore into the other man's arm

POSSE on his TRAIL

By SAM BRANT

Goaded on by memories that give him no rest, wanted bank bandit Waco Ward walks right into the camp of his pursuers!

THE tired horse moved slowly and "Waco" Ward slumped wearily in the saddle. He thought the sheriff's posse was far behind him, but the ever haunting fear remained, a fear that had never left him day or night, since the hold-up. The wind, blowing across the edge of the desert, was damp against his gaunt face. There would be rain before morning.

Ahead loomed the buildings of the small ranch, squat and shadowy in the moonlight. Dim light gleamed through the windows of the ranchhouse and shone thinly past the partly opened door.

"A man has to take chances when he's hungry," Ward muttered.

He rode up to the door, and sniffed eagerly for some aroma of food. It was nearly two days now since he had eaten and though his saddle-bags were filled with stolen money, there was no place within thirty miles where he could spend it.

A big round metal container hung on a nail at the side of the door. Ward looked closely at it and then smiled.

"A washtub," he said. "Looks like there's women folks here, just as I been hopin'."

He halted the sorrel beside the washtub and pounded loudly on the tin.

"Hello, the house!" he shouted. "Anybody home?"

From long habit, Ward stared back along the trail and waited for an answer, hand close to the butt of his gun. Then a sound came, not the sound he had expected, but a tiny, tremulous cry, fine and shrill like the high note of a violin. Ward frowned as he recognized the wail of a very small baby. Once he had a child of his own who had cried like that before his wife had left him and taken the little girl away. But that had been

a long time ago and, though the shadows of the owlhoot trails may dim, they cannot entirely blot out memories. They had all come back now—bitter memories, regrets that had never died.

The door swung open and a young woman stood framed in the light. She wore a calico dress, and her pretty face was tired as she stared at the big, heavy-set man in the saddle.

"Evenin', ma'am," Ward said. "Figgered maybe yuh might have somethin' to eat for a hungry hombre."

"A grub line rider." The woman leaned laxly against the door frame in a manner that betrayed exhaustion and despair. "I hoped it was my husband getting back from town. And you woke her up."

"Her?" Ward said in a puzzled tone.

"The baby—I've been hours getting her to sleep. Seemed like she was a little better. But now—" She made a helpless gesture with her hands. "Come in and I'll fix you something to eat."

WACO Ward started to dismount, then changed his mind. He looked at the woman in the doorway.

"What's wrong with the baby?" he asked.

"I don't know, but she's very sick." The woman's lips trembled. "My husband, Ted Martin, went to town for a doctor. If he would only get back."

"Don't reckon—" Ward began and then broke off.

There was no use in dashing the woman's hopes by telling her Doctor Laughton was not in town, so her husband wouldn't find him. Waco Ward knew the doctor had joined the posse that had kept the outlaw on the jump ever since the bank holdup, two days ago.

"Doc Laughton is all right on bullet wounds and stuff like that," Ward said, "but he shore ain't a baby specialist." He stared at her. She reminded him of his wife. Back in those days, his wife had been young and pretty, too, like this girl.

"He's our only chance," said Mrs. Martin. "The only doctor in miles."

Ward had seen the doctor with the posse where he had lost them back at Indian Head canyon. Laughton had his old black bag tied on the cantle of his saddle, and Ward wondered if there were medicines in that bag that would help a sick baby.

"Come in," the woman said. "I'll stir up the fire."

"Never mind, I ain't as interested in food as I was a while back," Ward said. "Yuh just take care of the baby. Maybe the doc will be showing up after awhile."

He rode away then, leaving her standing there in the doorway watching him. He was heading for Indian Head Canyon.

It was about nine o'clock when he spotted the posse's campfire. He wasn't taking any chances on an ambush by some hidden outpost, so he left his horse ground hitched back in the brush and approached warily.

Finally he was close enough to study the scene in the flickering light of the fire. He counted six men stretched out on their saddle blankets, apparently asleep. A seventh man was boiling some coffee in a pot on the fire. He sat on a rock and was apparently dozing.

Silently Ward circled the fire and reached the spot where the horses were tied. He picked out a good horse, threw Doctor Laughton's saddle on it, then cut the other animals loose and watched them drift away.

Finally Ward headed for the fire, gun in hand. A branch cracked loudly beneath his foot. The man on the rock leaped to his feet, hand flashing to his gun as Ward loomed into view. Ward's gun roared as the other man drew. A bullet tore through the man's arm, and reflex action of his fingers sent a bullet into the ground, while he braced himself against a tree with the other hand.

"Reach high, all of yuh!" Ward snapped, covering the other men with his gun as they awakened. "I want you, Doc Laughton."

The lean, gray haired old doctor rose to his feet and stood glaring at Ward.

"Get their guns and toss 'em into the fire, Doc." Ward ordered. "Make it fast."

Doctor Laughton gathered up the posse's weapon and cursed as he dropped them one by one into the fire. Then Ward forced the doctor over to the saddled horse, made Laughton mount and then ride to the place where Ward had left his horse.

"Let's go, Doc," Ward commanded harshly. "We got some ridin' to do tonight."

They rode away fast, for the possemen were clawing hot six-guns out of the fire, guns that were too hot to hold. By the time the weapons had cooled Ward and the doctor were a half mile away, heading back toward the Martin ranch.

It took quite a while to reach it, and neither man did any talking. Lights still gleamed through the windows when they rode up. Mrs. Martin heard the hoofbeats of the horses and came to the door.

"Here's the doc," Ward said wearily. "Had a little trouble findin' him."

THE woman uttered a glad cry and rushed to Doctor Laughton.

"My baby, Doctor," she said. "She's very sick. My husband went to town hours ago to get you, and Ted hasn't returned yet. I've been so worried and frightened."

Laughton looked at Ward.

"So that's it. That's why you brought me here."

"Don't talk so much," said Ward impatiently. "See what yuh can do for the baby."

The doctor swung out of the saddle and followed Mrs. Martin inside the house. Waco Ward dismounted and waited, finding it strange that he just had to know what the doctor had to say about that infant. Finally he stepped in through the front door. The doctor had just finished examining the small girl in her crib.

"This baby should go to a hospital," Doctor Laughton said slowly. "She needs an operation, a delicate one. It will take money."

"How much?" Mrs. Martin asked anxiously.

"A thousand dollars, at least," the doctor said.

"We're just nesters." She shook her head hopelessly. "We could never pay."

Waco Ward thought swiftly as he stood listening. He glanced at the baby, a strange gleam burned in his hard gray eyes.

"The bank pays a thousand dollars to any citizen who returns holdup loot, don't it, Doc?"

"That's right." Laughton nodded.

Ward looked at the woman and then at the crib. He smiled a strange sort of smile.

"I'm leavin' my horse and taking the one you were ridin', Doc," he said as he moved toward the door. "Like you to see that Mrs. Martin here gets what's in my saddle-bags."

Then he was gone, and they heard the thud of hoofs as he rode away. Doctor Laughton looked at the woman.

"Do you know who he was?" the doctor asked.

"Why of course," Mrs. Martin said. "He was our friend."

Doctor Laughton had been around a long time and he knew he wouldn't be riding with the posse when it started out again.

He nodded slowly.

"You're right, Mrs. Martin," he said. "He was a good friend."

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The townsfolk of Dry Bluffs were being fleeced under the very eyes of Sheriff MacLoyd—until the tradin' hombre found a way to turn the tables on the hornswogglers

IN

Doc Swap Makes a Pitch

An Uproarious Yarn

By BEN FRANK

●

Coming Next Month!

Step Dubble shook both his guns in Pete the Blow-Harper's face

The Confidential Ranger

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

CAPTAIN Temple Harkin looked at the slim, hard-faced rider who had come to the Ranger camp at Lost Ford bottoms on the Red River. The captain recognized the youngster. A few years before, down at Lamar Crossing, a man by the name of Topane had been killed. This was his son Rindale Topane. Rindy hadn't been hard or mean, or rough when his father, a deputy sheriff trying to do his duty, had been shot down by one of the Indian Territory outlaw bands. A boy orphaned by bullets—no wonder he grew up ambitious to be a Texas Ranger! There he stood, gray-eyed, square-shouldered, probably one hundred thirty-five lbs. on the hoof.

Rindy had come riding in with two

Young Rindy Topane Takes on an Outlaw-Huntin' Chore!

horses, both well taken care of, one saddled, the other packing a soogan, frying pan, sheet-iron utility pail, spare rope, and extras. From the saddle hung a rifle in the boot. The horses were nibbling grass, the saddled one with loose reins looped over the horn. A long rope with a beef-bone honda hung ready for roping.

"Why do yuh want to be a Ranger?" Captain Temple inquired.

"Why, I'm gettin' bad." The youngster looked away. "I mean I might's well get killed honorable, 'stead of just fussin', the way I've been."

"Yuh're runnin'—on the dodge?" the Ranger asked sharply.

"No, suh, Cap'n!" Rindy Topane shook his head. "My mother was a good woman. She taught me readin', writin', and to stand up and take my medicine. Both times I was exonerated. The coroner recommended I done meanness in self-defense. The grand jury failed to indict."

"Yuh was sober?" the captain asked.

"I never tasted liquor," the boy answered. "Bob Reeks was drunk. The other feller, Ringo Tobrin, he called himself, he abused two-three kids with a quirt and I stopped him—roped him. When I shook him loose he drawed—missed two-three shots. I got him. Afterwards, come to find out, there was a reward on him, dead or alive, for some meanness he'd done up Tar Creek way in the Nations. I got seven hundred and fifty dollars. Mother wouldn't touch the money! She worried the way women do and cried. Called me a killer. So—so here I be. If I got to be bad and do meanness, I want to do it honorable. I'd like to be a Ranger, suh."

"Huh! Another danged scoundrel, wantin' to be bad honorable." The captain grimaced.

RINDALE TOPANE kind of sagged, turning away, looking very sorry and discouraged. His horses started toward him, and Captain Harkin nodded. Some unlikely-looking men were liked by horses and dogs.

The captain spoke up. "Hold on, boy! Don't go off mad! Grub's coming up! Yuh ain't in no hurry?"

"I wouldn't know where to go from here," Rindy said, shaking his head. "Up wind, prob'ly."

The captain kept the boy in camp. Rindy was quiet and a willing worker in his association with the Rangers. He dragged in firewood, cooked the best johnnycake they'd eaten in many a day, and sometimes brought in a buck deer for venison. Uncomplainingly he did the little odd jobs nobody likes to do that somebody has to do—cutting kindlings, hauling water, going for the mail.

They all liked him. At the same time, the way he practised drawing his short guns with both hands and held the breech of his rifle to either shoulder, seemed to mark him as bad. Legally he had come clear from killings, but the manner of his father's death had left its mark on him. And, too, the years he had helped his widow mother, and her strict teaching had given him the look of bitterness so many victims of sorrow and trouble and endurance wear.

Captain Harkin was full up as regards his little troup. He scraped his allowance for expenses in order to give the boy hostler's wages, and Rindy more than paid his board by bringing in venison, wild turkeys, and wild geese—prime meat in the autumn season. He wasn't expected to do any menial jobs, but he did whatever came to his hand. Once, when two Rangers rode in through a sleet storm, Rindy not only cleaned up their guns while they slept the clock twice around; he soaped their saddles, greased their boots, dried out their clothing over the office stove.

Then news came down Red River that horse thieves had pulled off a raid and that a sheriff and a posseman had been killed. Three men, taking a small herd up across the big pasture, had just disappeared, cows and all. Commissaries were being raided, and ammunition, gift stuff for women, clothing, were being taken.

First reports had it that it was the Dubble brothers, and then that it was the No Man's Land gang. They operated well up into Kansas and were making themselves a nuisance in the Indian Territory. Then they killed one of the Texas Panhandle Rangers. He'd gone over into the wild, rough brush country in the western part of the Territory, as a kind of spy in enemy territory, to look for hideouts. He was Jim Markeen, a tall, handsome, swaggering son of Ireland. Two Indian Territory policemen found him and

brought him to the Ranger camp in a homemade coffin. The Indian police were breeds, quiet, competent men who had scores of their own to settle with the Dubbles.

Losing Markeen angered all the Rangers throughout the section, and when Captain Crendall, who had let Markeen undertake that trip, came down to talk with Harkin, the whole troupe sat around and listened to the officers talk. Even if the outlaws were outside Texas, they had shot down a Ranger in cold blood, and the feeling ran high that they should be brought to justice.

Being laconic men, the Rangers soon talked themselves out. But they sat late in the light of the driftwood fire, thoughtful and silent, for none was a story-teller or in a mood for stories.

Then Rindale Topane spoke up. "I've been across that No Man's Land trail," he said. "Reckon I know the way. Likely I can get there. I'll go see if I can get news."

"Who's the kid?" Captain Crendall asked Harkin.

Harkin didn't answer immediately. Instead he gazed at the youngster who looked so boyish in the flickering lights from the campfire. It was just possible that Rindy might find the answer to the problem of obscurity that covered the operations of the No Man's Land gang. No Man's Land was the refuge of outlaws who fled from Judge Parker's jurisdiction which extended across the Nations from Ft. Smith. No Man's Land, bordering the northern end of the Texas Panhandle, was much closer to the Texas Ranger districts than to the authority of the Federal court.

Presently Captain Harkin nodded and answered his fellow officer. "Reckon the boy has the answer. He's good!" Then he turned to Rindale Topane. "Reckon yuh know what yuh'll be up against, kid. Yuh've asked to be a Ranger. Those fellers knew Jim Markeen was a Ranger, and they shot him in the back. They must of had the list of Rangers, at least those along the Territory border, where they've raided when we weren't around, or they laid low till we went out on our patrols. There's no word of yuh bein' on the list, Rindy. Only us Rangers here know that now I've appointed yuh a special Ranger. Yuh need expense money?"

"No suh!" The youth shook his head. "Even expense money'd be doggone s'picious up there, and across the Nation. When a man goes scouting, he gen'rally ain't got his expenses paid, suh! Well—reckon I'd better ride."

THREE hours after night had fallen, Rindy Topane went out after his horse, saddled it and rode away in the dark, leaving most of his outfit in the tent where he slept. In their silent way the Rangers had watched him head down Red River. While they listened to the throbbing of hoofs on clay hardpan till he was out of hearing, they were thinking over the remarks of Captain Harkin, his fair warning about the perils of meeting the No Man's Land desperadoes. Hard as Rindy appeared, in his puttering around the camp he had showed a boyishness under the grim veneer his killings had put on him. He had enough nerve, but the big thing about a Ranger was experience, knowledge of outlaw ways and trickery.

In the morning, the Rangers were up and, for the first time in weeks, got their own breakfast. The visitor, Capt. Crendall, rode away to the northwest, having swapped information with Capt. Harkin. Harkin's riders divided up the odd jobs which Rindy had taken over—and by more than that much they missed the kid.

Over the telegraph came news of Rangers being needed here and there, and the men were scattered on assignments. Nobody mentioned Rindy, did not even ask if he'd been seen or heard from.

Captain Crendall, not knowing the boy, didn't think much of that kind of help—kid stuff among Territory scoundrels and outlaws. His own troops were mostly grown men, a good twenty-odd years of age on the average. Markeen had been riding since he was twelve years old—and that meant twelve years, six of it patrolling. What if the kid *had* killed two men—that was experience!

Rangers work fast. But a month went by and not a whisper in the wind reached Crendall in his upper Panhandle camp. The only word was that the gang led by the Dubble brothers had been lucky up in Kansas. They had got away with sixty or seventy pounds of gold coins meant for a ranch sale—almost sixteen thousand

dollars in cash. Naturally, having all that money, the bandits would spend it before striking again.

Beaver was as likely a place for a spree as any. And sure enough, word echoed down into the Panhandle that the outlaws had taken over Beaver and were whooping it up—drinking, dancing, gambling. A cattle buyer, disappointed because he hadn't found beef for sale in No Man's Land, came down into the Panhandle and told Capt. Crendall that since the No Man's Land boys had taken to robbing stages, banks and such cash-in-hand institutions they seemed to have given up running off cattle in bunches and herds. In fact, with life made so easy by the stolen gold, they hardly even killed their own beef

Cal Lingdon, the cattle drover, told a queer story. He said the Dubble boys had stopped a stage up in Kansas, on the Cimarron road. They got the iron box and sent the stage on about its transport business. They left the gold in the box, loaded it onto a two-horse buckboard, and headed at a larruping run for No Man's Land, one of the Dubbles driving. Four or five others, riding on ahead, stopped in Beaver at the Best Chance Bar, one of their favorite commissaries, to drink, eat and be merry.

The buckboard was expected any minute, and a meal and drinks had been ordered for "Fret" Dubble, the driver. Half an hour, an hour passed, but the buckboard didn't show up. When the cattle buyer left Beaver, the Dubble boys and their companions had been riding three days, and they still hadn't even found wheel tracks of the buckboard after it had gone over the blind crossing of the Cimarron.

The word passed around that Fret Dubble had just naturally lit out on his brothers, taking all the profits of the ranch-gold-stage transaction. There had been hard feelings now and again among the Dubble outlaws. The five brothers were naturally overbearing bulldozers, and big "Stinger" Dubble, the oldest one, was always snarling and talking because "Peewee" Dubble had more brains than all four of his brothers put together. Muscle always did envy brains, no matter the size of the package they came in.

Fret Dubble, sly and crafty and a competent horseman, never talked much. Of cold nerve he sure had plenty, but nobody ever knew what he was thinking. Some claimed he wasn't any spender but had cached most of his takes. He never spread his money around or made friends.

The next news from No Man's Land was heartening to the Rangers who rode the Territory line. Big Stinger Dubble and Peewee Dubble were known to have had a falling out down in the rough brush country where they had a hang-out in a sooner ranch. This ranch had been settled illegally, and the federal marshals were hunting for it. But whoever ran it had covered his tote-wagon trail, sure enough. The Dubble gang, cutting across from a raid in Texas, had stumbled onto the squatter and agreed not to betray the location if they could use the place as a hideout whenever necessary. Now there was a rumor that the big and the little brothers of the Dubbles had at last gone for their guns, crossed bullets. Stinger was reported dead, and Peewee hard hit, but not fatally.

The trouble was over Fret Dubble. Peewee claimed Fret never betrayed or doublecrossed his brothers, even though he might have held out on some of the pickups they used. Fret was honorable as regards the family, Peewee declared, and anybody who said different was a traitor and an ingrate. Big Stinger said different and drew his gun to prove it. Peewee drew his and won the battle, and would probably survive his wounds.

NEW stories came with every passerby. Sometimes they were true and sometimes they were invented by people averse to having the actualities known. Then a cowboy, riding south for a change of climate, came out of the Kansas sandhills, crossed the Cimarron, and stopped over in Beaver. He had a note to Captain Crendall of the Panhandle Rangers The note said:

Dere Capn Crendall:

Plese notify Capn Temple Harkin that the Dubble gang is very bad but it ant so bad as it uster be. Two is daid, Fret an Big Stinger. Peewee is discuridged an sore hit. Others is splitin up.

Rindy

Captain Crendall sent the note on to Captain Harkin, adding that, according to

the rumors he had heard, Rindy's word was reliable. The outlaws were all hard up, due to the loss of the iron box of gold which had disappeared with Fred Dubble in the buckboard.

So Fret was dead? Crendall would believe that when he saw the skull and Fret's teeth were identified. Fret had one of the best gold-tooth jobs Doc Frackelton of Sheridan, Wyoming, ever made, to repair the damage done by a bullet to Fret's jaws.

It became known that the outlaws had quarreled among themselves and broke up into two or three petty larceny bands. They fell back on running off small bunches of beefs and cayuses, mostly cheap stuff. Because they were fighting among themselves, they didn't know when they would be betrayed into ambush or trapped by Texas Rangers. The Dubbles were still trying to trace Fret and that express company gold, still hoping, especially, to locate the loot.

Finally, living on cornmeal and jackrabbits, calf meat, and longing for salt pork and bacon, the Dubbles declared a temporary truce and got together on the hidden ranch. Peewee was recovered enough so he was able to do light plow-horse riding, but he was still sore from his wounds. He wasn't thick enough, hardly, to stop a buckshot, let alone a .22-caliber express slug. The brothers rendezvoused at the Best Chance and, to celebrate their trusting one another and getting together, they had a dance. It was a humdinger of a party.

The music was led by a foolish, staring-eyed, loose-lipped fellow who played a blow-harp; and the best and most exciting tunes they'd ever heard spread through the ballroom. The little David, playing on his harp, just naturally took over the music. Frank Marion's fiddle, Jim Turring's drum, and Missy Lewson's organ all played second, following up the melodies with chords.

This foolish fellow called himself a hill billy, and his name was Pete the Blow-Harper.

"I done played from Boston to California!" he boasted. "I can play steppin' pieces and I can play music nobody can dance to, or even sing and whistle to!"

He made good, too, and the funny part of it was, he could play music that made everybody sit down and listen. Tears rolled down the cheeks of some of the hardest, toughest, meanest scoundrels Judge Parker hadn't got around to hanging yet. That was comical, for it made those scoundrels mad and tormented to think a foolish blow-harper could soften them up and make them sentimental thataway.

"Step" Dubble, who had choked, wiped his eyes and like to have burst out crying, got so mad that he went over and shook both his short guns in Pete the Blow-Harper's face, declaring to man and devil nobody had a right to manhandle him with no danged musical tune, thataway. And all Pete did was grin and blow and make Step's shoulders begin to lift and his heels begin to tap until that outlaw backed up and put on one of the most notorious solo jigs ever seen from No Man's Land. It was something to tell about—an ugly desperado, drunk and mean, won to good humor by an old folk tune.

After the reunion party, the boys figured on doing a job to get themselves stakes for a spree or perhaps to buy ranches. They would raid a railroad, an express company or a bank. To the Dubbles, any of these represent enormous resources to which they could help themselves with the aid of their guns.

Apparently they were making extensive preparations, taking their time planning a raid that would make them rich, famous and dreaded from the Ozarks to the Rio Grande. Ft. Smith would tremble in its boots, and the Indian Territory would be dazed in the face of such outlaw nerve.

The Dubbles slipped away in the dark of the morning, five of them, and angled eastward. By night they followed the trails across the Cherokee Strip and hid in caves and camps by day. They arranged for relays of both saddle and pack horses.

"We'll bring back a hoss load of gold—mebbe two!" Peewee Dubble boasted in his hoarse, rumbling voice.

They arrived on the outskirts of Indian Medicine, named for a queer spring that flowed oil instead of water and which fumed and smelled for miles downwind. There the five men slept through a twenty-four-hour day, casing the job they had to do, making sure of all details. In the

morning they drifted separately into town and ate a hearty early dinner.

The warm wind had made everyone sleepy except a boy named Jubal Wickley who had just bought himself a new-fangled .25-caliber carbine repeater and a box of .25-20 cartridges. Jubal was sitting on the bench in front of the gun store, filling the rifle magazine with shells when he looked up and saw five riders, leading two trim packers with paniers, converge on the Busy Corner and stop in front of the First Indian Medicine Bank. Four men slid off their horses, leaving the fifth man to hold the pack animal ropes and the saddle animal reins. This man drew his revolver—which was a mistake.

IN ALL Indian Territory, and probably in all the adjoining states, there wasn't a boy who wouldn't have recognized that gesture as a piece of bandit technic. Mouth open, eyes bulging, Jubal Wickley sat frozen, gripping his new carbine.

Two or three long minutes passed. A man came out of the Bon-Ton Restaurant and started leisurely down the street. Two women were eating lunch out of a willow splint basket in the shadow of the Handsome Harry Amusement Emporium. Up and down the street was the sunny, midday quiet and inactivity.

Suddenly there was a muffled yell in the bank, and the next minute a man came staggering out. He carried two canvas bags, about the size of twenty-five-pound shot bags, under each arm. He got to one of the pack horses, and the rider there helped him get the four bags, two on each side, in paniers. Another man appeared with four more bags, and these were put into the second pack horse paniers. Shots were fired in the bank, and a man in a white collar and fancy store clothes ran out and pitched forward on his face.

At this several men came out of buildings along the business street, to see what the fuss and excitement was. The man who had held the horses now whipped his mount to a gallop and, leading the two pack horses, turned the corner in a swirl of dust that blew back into the main street. The two men who had brought out the canvas money bags swung into their saddles. They pulled their revolvers and began to shoot up and down the street, driving the curious spectators to cover.

Two other men ran out of the bank, stepped on the tie rail, and made prodigious leaps into their saddles. As the horses leaped forward, the men turned to watch their back track.

Then Jubal Wickley thawed out. Here were bank robbers. They had shot down the man who had come from the Bon-Ton and scattered the spectators. The two women eating their lunch screamed as one of the outlaws let fly a bullet in their direction.

Jubal Wickley had leveled his rifle and sighted on one of the bandits. He pulled the trigger and that man sagged in his saddle, dropped his revolver and the reins, and gripped his saddle-horn. By that time Jubal had aimed and fired at another man who jerked crazily, then shot over the head of his bucking horse and lay motionless in the dust. A third shot cracked from the boy's new carbine and a man who was driving in frantic panic fear pitched forward on his horse's neck, then rolled off the horse on the wrong side.

Another shot Jubal traded with the remaining bandit whose bullets smacked wide of him, but the boy's bullets went straight, for Jubal's father had taught him never to waste even a .22-short rimfire shoot, but always hit his mark!

Four bandits and three citizens were down. Jubal Wickley gazed in astonishment at the tragedy that had developed before his eyes and at the deadly accuracy of his new .25-20 carbine. For a second he stood in rising astonishment and fear then turned and pelted into the alley where he had hitched his bronc. He jerked the reins loose, leaped into saddle and leaning forward—hugging with his knees, still hanging onto his carbine—he drove for the open country, out among the buckthorns and brush and wild turkey feeding lands.

What wouldn't the city marshal, the Indian police, the U.S. Marshals and Judge Smith and all the other notables do to a boy who had mixed up in such a man-sized proposition as a bank holdup and killings?

"Oh, I hope to die my bullets didn't hit!" Jubal whimpered in his excitement and fear. "Mebbe nobody noticed, but I know they did!"

A week later Jubal Wickley was located

a hundred miles up north in Kansas where he was hiding in his uncle's house. His uncle had never been prouder of his blood relations than he was now of his nephew, because single-handed, that boy had finished off the Dubble band of outlaws. No wonder he had got the buck fever and kind of lost track of his nerve. But he had stayed with the outlaws until he had finished them off. It was understandable if he felt modest and afraid and had lit out, instead of reporting to the nearest authorities and awaiting the action of the coroner's jury.

They brought the boy back and paraded him with loud acclaim through the streets of Indian Medicine. They fed him till he like to have bust and paid him some of the rewards they collected on the dead outlaws. Between times, they wondered what had become of the lone bandit, recognized as Peewee Dubble, who had got away with a good two hundred pounds of gold.

Peewee had pretended to be headed for Arkansas and the swamps of the Mississippi River bottoms. But out in the wild lands he circled back and rode the relays the boys had established along the Cherokee Strip and finally got back into No Man's Land. Peewee congratulated himself. He had all the profits of the holdup of the bank. Nobody was left for him to whack up with. He figured his take was close to sixty-four thousand dollars—and avoirdupois sixteen-ounce pounds at that, instead of the skimpy troy weight used to measure gold and other precious metals.

Peewee Dubble knew the small-time scoundrels of the No Man's Land gang would be waiting to make him whack up with them. He didn't figure on going equal snucks with anyone. Instead of going to the Best Chance or into Beaver to hide out while the excitement died down and the bankers and authorities quit their sputtering, he swung off southward. He went to that hidden squatter ranch back in the rough hills of the Territory.

EVEN though he had had good relays posted, Peewee arrived on a tired horse and leading two stumbling pack animals. The old rancher, saying nothing, welcomed him and was glad to get twenty-five double-eagle pieces of gold for the accommodations he provided.

In the cabin was a man Peewee was mighty glad to see—Pete the Blow-Harper. Foolish, but good around horses, and minding his own business, which seemed to be mostly music and odd-jobbing for meals and lodging, that scoundrel was sure convenient to have around.

"Pete!" Peewee greeted in pleased surprise. "I'm riding down into Texas. Want to go along? Won't cost you a cent!"

"Why, I reckon," Pete said. "Just as long as my music pieces don't bother yuh none!"

"Why, I could listen all day to yore playin'!" the last of the Dubble brothers exclaimed. . . .

So Pete began to look after Peewee's horses, oiling his saddles, making camp, cooking, following the back trails of Indian Territory and into Texas.

"I know where one of them express company iron boxes is," Pete the Blow-Harper said one day in the foolish, grinning way he had. "Just down here 'tis. Some fellers had it. They'd killed a feller for it. They got into a difficulty over it and killed one another, just back and forth, like nothin' else. I burried them so buzzards wouldn't clean their bones."

"Show me!" Peewee exclaimed.

Sure enough, that foolish Pete showed Peewee Dubble the heavy iron box, too awkward to tote on a pack horse, where he'd hidden it in a side hill cave and the three-man grave he had dug. And there in the cave were short guns, saddles, three complete outfits.

Peewee knew those guns and rigs. So that was what had become of his brother Fret! "Cub" Dwillen, Hank Isruth and "Salt Grass" Dogan had killed Fret for the box, and here was proof they were traitors.

In the box, which foolish Pete knew how to open, was all that stage money gold —sixteen thousand dollars.

"We'll just put that into our paniers!" Peewee declared.

"There's a buckboard just down the trace," Pete objected. "If'n we get held up, robbers can't ride away with that boxful. I can lock it. Then nobody can manhandle it!"

Sure enough, there was the buckboard Fret had driven away. It had been greased and put under a wind-blow hole in a dry-wash wall. Pete brought out the harness and hitched the two pack horses to the

buckboard. The iron box containing the eight twenty-five-pound bags and the stage coach sixteen thousand dollars—making, Peewee figured, eighty thousand dollars—was covered with a tarp and rode behind the front seat like a soogan and a grub box.

Peewee was pleased. A drummer never rode through Indian Territory with more style than Peewee Dubble. He liked to talk and he told Pete how they'd go down toward the Rio Grande border and buy a ranch, and stock up with cows, and settle down and be respectable. Foolish Pete took it all in, mouth open, eyes popping, declaring he never had anticipated being partner in a ranch. No, suh! He never had. My land, but he was lucky.

Accordingly, they rode down into the Red River and came to Lost Ford bottoms. They crossed the river and, following the old trace, rode right square into Captain Temple Harkin's Ranger camp. There was Captain Harkin, Tensas Lingum, and three or four other Rangers, the last men Peewee Dubble had any idea he was going to meet.

"We better keep right on goin' through!" Peewee whispered, his voice like a wildcat's hiss.

Pete disagreed. "These fellers is foolish," he whispered back. "They don't know nothin'. I bet they'd give us supper, and bed us down for the night. I'll play a tune for 'em!"

He played "Texas Boys," and the chorus that told how the Texas Boys grew up with guns for toys and how, when they got to be men, they romped and roamed from the Guadaloupes to the Huntsville pen. Just like that! And the Rangers gathered around, smiling. One of them pulled off the tarp and stood staring at that big iron box that weighed a good five hundred pounds now. It was as good as five years in the Sante Fe or Huntsville, or Ft. Smith jail to be caught with a box like that.

Peewee's hand dropped to the ivory handle of his blue-barreled Colt; and like spokes of a wheel, pointing at their hub appeared the guns of six Rangers. Peewee looked at that foolish blow-harper, who was playing away like he was the happiest and stupidest boy in all the world.

"Listen! Listen!" Peewee gasped, putting up both hands. "Look at what yore plumb foolishness got us into!"

"Foolishness!" Pete shook his head. "I told yuh we'd get supper and mebbe lodging. That ain't foolishness, Peewee Dubble. I'll pay for it—playing my music!"

Captain Temple Harkin blinked. There was that hard-faced Rindale Topane, who had inveigled himself into the Dubble No Man's Land gang of bandits—as Blow-Harping Pete. Partly Rindy and partly that Medicine Spring kid with his new .25-20, had plumb broke the outlaw band right to destruction. Even now, Peewee Dubble didn't know what had happened to him, nor how. There was the eighty thousand dollars loot money.

Not till the next day did Peewee Dubble know he'd been taken in by a Ranger whose name wasn't even on the state roster—taken in by the kid whose father the Dubbles had killed when they rustled their first cows.

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Doc stood leaning against an oak, happily watching the scene

The Good Old Days

Sheriff MacLoyd gets a hair-raisin' birthday celebration such as only the tradin' hombre and Dry Bluffs folks can cook up!

A PLEASED expression on his round whiskery face, old Doc Swap studied the yearling steer in his pole corral. It had been corn fed. It was fat. It was ready for the butcher. Anyone in the little cowtown of Dry Bluffs would likely have sold it weeks ago. Anyone except old Doc Swap.

Doc was a swapper, not a seller. Besides, he didn't need the money. He reckoned he had enough of that lying around in the bank to last him the rest of his life, anyway. His pink fat face puckering thoughtfully, he turned away from the steer and headed toward town.

"Reckon I might as well see if that ding-dum old coyote's got anything worth tradin' for," he mused, thinking fondly of Sheriff MacLoyd, his rival in the two occupations dearest to his heart—fiddle playing and swapping.

But Doc was a strategist. Instead of approaching the cracker-box jail from the front, he ambled down the weedy

A Doc Swap Story by BEN FRANK

alley to the back of the building. Nothing like reconnoitering before attacking. Parting a clump of tall sunflowers, he felt a quiver of excitement at what he saw. Tied to a post stood a black and white spotted pony. The sheriff, Doc realized happily, had acquired a new horse. One which Doc aimed to own.

Not that Doc had any need for a saddle pony. In fact, he wasn't exactly built to fit a saddle, but anything the sheriff owned, Doc was sure to try to get in a trade by hook or crook. Tightening his fancy pearl-gray Stetson over his bald head, he rounded the corner of the jail. He'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered the trade one of the highlights of his career.

MacLoyd sat on the front steps, his bony chin cupped in bony fingers, his pale eyes holding a dying-calf expression. He looked so down and out that Doc felt a sudden worry—not that he would admit it even to himself.

"Fine mornin'," he observed cheerfully.

MacLoyd started, lifted his eyes, saw Doc and looked all the more unhappy. He uncrossed his bony bowed legs, sent a sizzling stream of tobacco juice halfway across the dusty street and snorted in disgust.

"Doc," he said, "yuh're batty!"

"Now, lis'en," Doc bristled, "I ain't—"

"Doc," MacLoyd interrupted, "day after tomorrow is my birthday. When a man gets my age, birthdays make him stop an' think. I been thinkin' of the good ole days. Them was the happy times—gun fightin', cattle rustlin', night riders! Now, things is so quiet I don't even pack my six-gun anymore. Even give my deputy a month's vacation. But in the ole days—"

Doc shuddered slightly. "Yuh don't mean yuh wisht them ole days was back again?"

MacLoyd nodded his bony head. "I shore do! Remember the Whistlin' Kid? Kinda wisht I hadn't of captured him. There was a hombre who could really shoot."

"Yuh mean yuh wisht he was still runnin' loose? Why, he was a killer. Lucky he didn't get yuh that time—"

"Remember how ole Jake Duskin an' Bob Walker used to feud? An' how I used to quiet 'em down? But now, ever since young Harry Duskin married ole Walker's girl—"

"Saves yuh a lot of trouble," Doc commented.

"An' Sugar Valley. Remember before the nesters began to settle it, how the different cow outfits would fight over the water in Sugar Creek? Them was the days when men was men!"

"Yeah," Doc said, "an' a lot of 'em got killed."

"Then there was the Injuns. Had to watch 'em all the time. Never will forget when they burned out the Porters."

"Sheriff," Doc said weakly, "them days was mighty bad for everybody, includin' the Injuns."

"Now look at the Injuns." MacLoyd pointed a long finger at a tall young man hurrying along the other side of the street. "There goes Charley Whitehoss. Dressed up like a city dude. Wouldn't know a bow from a arrow. Even went to college. An' him the son of ole White Eagle, the fightin'est, meanest chief what ever lifted a scalp!"

"But White Eagle signed a treaty an'—"

"There's the ole cuss now, settin' in front of the feed store. Got on shoes an' regular clothes an' likely a pocketful of money. Doc, things has gone to pot. In the good ole—"

"Yuh're crazier'n a bull with a bellyful of loco weed!" Doc snorted. "Things are better now than they ever was."

MacLoyd shook his head sadly. "Give me the whistle of bullets an' the smell of gunpowder. Give me the ole days when—"

"Well," Doc cut in sagely, "yuh might as well think of somethin' else, for them days is over. By the way, I noticed yuh got a new hoss. Shore is a mean lookin' bag of bones."

This should have brought MacLoyd to his feet, cussing. However, the bean-pole sheriff never batted an eye.

"Hosses ain't what they used to be, Doc."

DOC felt slightly ill. He couldn't remember the day when he'd seen his old rival so down in the dumps.

"Got a steer I might swap for that pony," he said. " 'Course I'd want some boot. Mebbe yore saddle an'—"

He let his voice trail off, for he realized

that the sheriff wasn't hearing a word.

Stiffly MacLoyd shoved to his feet, groaned and sighed.

"Reckon I'll go inside an' take a nap. Mebbe I'll dream I am back livin' in them happy days of long ago."

With that, he stumbled across the porch and into his two-by-four office.

Wide-eyed, Doc stared after him. This wasn't the snorting, swearing, swapping sheriff of Bluff County. This was a doddering, childish old man. Cussing unhappily, Doc turned away.

"The good ole days—phooey!" he snorted. "The ole ninny oughta have some sense pounded into him."

"What's that about the good ole days?" a voice asked.

Doc stared up into the red face of Ban Osgood, Mayor of Dry Bluffs and a friend of forty years.

"MacLoyd's havin' a birthday in a couple of days," Doc growled, "an' it's got him livin' in the past."

The mayor grinned. "Mebbe we oughta have a birthday party for the ole coot an' cheer him up?"

The wheels in Doc's head spun. "Ban," he yipped, "lis'en!"

As Doc talked, the grin widened on the mayor's red face.

"Doc," he said, "yuh shore can count on me!"

Grinning, Doc waddled across the street to the feed store where White Eagle sat, smoking a corn-cob pipe. Young Charley Whitehorse had joined his father, and the two grinned at Doc.

"Hello, Doc," Charley greeted.

"Charley," Doc puffed, "do yuh know the difference between a bow an' a arrow?"

"Well," Charley chuckled, "a bow is a resilient length of wood bent in a slight arc with a leather thong attached to—"

"Charley jokeum, Doc," White Eagle growled. "He wonum arrow shootin' championship at college. He good like his Pa."

"Remember the good ole days?" Doc asked White Eagle.

White Eagle shuddered slightly. "No pumpum oil out of ground in good ole days. No money. Rotten tobacco."

"Doc," young Charley grinned, "what're yuh getting at?"

Doc didn't waste any time explaining his plans. Young Charley laughed outright and gleefully ran his brown fingers through his city-cut black hair. Old White Eagle's dried-up face cracked into a wicked grin.

"Can do, huh?" he asked his son.

"We certainly can!" Charley nodded.

Doc hurried on to Cy Pulley's barbershop. As he'd expected, he found Pee-wee Miller playing Cy a game of checkers. Pee-wee was a runty little man who'd cooked for ranches and railroad gangs in his younger days when he wasn't arguing about who had won the Civil War.

"Pee-wee," Doc said, "got to talk to yuh about business."

"Shore, Doc," Pee-wee said, getting to his feet and upsetting the checker board.

"Dag-gone't!" Cy bellowed. "Just when I had yuh whipped!"

"No such thing!" Pee-wee contested hotly. I—"

"Come on," Doc said. "Ain't got no time to argue."

He led Pee-wee down the street to his neat white cottage at the edge of town. He towed the runty cook around the barn and pointed out the fat steer in the pole corral.

"Ain't forgot how to barbecue, have yuh, Pee-wee?"

Pee-wee shook his grizzled head. "Reckon not. Whose critter is that?"

"Sheriff MacLoyd's," Doc answered innocently. "MacLoyd's givin' a birthday party in a couple of days an' asked me to make all the arrangements. Lis'en careful, Pee-wee."

"I'll attend to things," Pee-wee promised after Doc had finished talking.

Right away, Doc hustled about harnessing his team of fat sleek bays to his covered wagon in which he carried his swapping goods. Doc was going on a swapping spree to Sugar Valley. The valley nesters were traders. Swapping sharpened Doc's mind, and he reckoned he'd need it plenty sharp to make all his plans work successfully and swap MacLoyd out of the spotted pony to boot. After loading some grub and a few odds and ends of swapping goods into the wagon, Doc was on his way.

He drove straight to Harry Duskin's place on the bend of Sugar Creek. It was Harry who had married Sally Walker, thus ending the Duskin-Walker feud.

Now, Harry and Sally stood on their front porch, watching their two small children at play.

"Got some little wheels that yuh could use in makin' a wagon for yore kids," Doc murmured.

Harry was interested. He took a wheel in his big hands and eyed it speculatively.

"Got some Plymouth Rock roosters I might swap," he offered.

"Might swap," Doc said, "if yuh an' Sally would revive the ole Duskin-Walker feud for a few hours."

When he left the Duskin place, Doc had three roosters in a crate. Also, he had Harry's and Sally's promise of co-operation in Doc's scheme.

A little later, Doc drove up to Loop and Puney Porters' homestead. As usual, Loop and Puney were in a wrangle. Seeing Doc, they stopped quarreling and turned glaring eyes on Doc.

"What're yuh lookin' so happy about?" Puney asked suspiciously.

"Don't aim to do no swappin'," Loop said. "Hey, is them Plymouth Rock roosters in that crate?"

Doc ignored the question. "Say, do yuh boys remember the good ole days when the Injuns burned yore cabin?"

PUNEY swore heartily, and Loop allowed he couldn't remember anything good about those days, but he could use some Plymouth Rock roosters. Doc didn't waste time driving his usual hard bargain. He swapped two roosters for an old coffeepot, two bushels of corn and a pound of bacon to boot. Before he left, however, he had both Puney and Loop grinning from ear to ear.

"We'll be seein' yuh," they promised gleefully.

Doc headed his bays toward Ed Lunt's place, but he hadn't gone a mile when he met Rip Riley, foreman of the Double-O, and a half-dozen cowboys.

"Rip," Doc said, "I bet yuh often pine for the days when you an' yore boys had fun chasin' rustlers into the hills?"

Rip let out a well-chosen cuss word. "Chasin' rustlers ain't exactly my idea of fun, Doc."

One of the rannies spotted Doc's remaining rooster. He licked his chops and allowed he'd like to make a dicker.

"Ain't nothin' I like better'n roast chicken," he added.

"Might do some swappin'," Doc murmured. "Especially if you boys'd like to have a little fun to boot."

Quickly he outlined his plans.

"Sounds good to me," Rip said, "but yuh'd better talk it over with the boss at the ranch."

Doc swapped the rooster for an old frying pan and a much worn lariat. Looking at his loot, he reckoned he could have done better if he hadn't had so much else on his mind. Sighing a little, he drove on toward Ed Lunt's.

Ed and his wife, Minnie, came to the door of their cabin when Doc rapped a fat fist on the panel. They invited the old swapper in for dinner.

"Folks," Doc said over his second piece of raisin pie, "day after tomorrow is Sheriff MacLoyd's birthday. He's givin' a big party in Dry Bluff. Sort of for ole times' sake. Wants all the valley people to come. Thought mebbe, Ed, yuh'd like to ride around an' tell everybody about it."

"Be glad to," Ed said quickly.

"Want us women to bring the food?" Minnie asked.

"Just some pies an' cakes an' fresh-baked bread," Doc answered blandly. "MacLoyd'll furnish the meat."

"Been a long time since we've had a big shindig in Dry Bluffs," Ed mused.

"Not since the good ole days," Doc murmured.

Doc was in his wagon and all set to drive on when Ed spied an old corn knife among Doc's swapping goods. Doc really didn't have his mind on swapping, but he did get a pound of coffee, a small can of flour and a moth-eaten horse blanket in the deal.

Two homesteads lay between the Lunts' place and the Double-O ranch. The first belonged to Sam Bristol. In his younger days, Sam had traveled with a wild-West show and was known as "Sure-shot Sam, The Rifle Wizard." When Doc drove up to his cabin, he found Sam sitting in the shade, reading a tattered magazine.

"Sam," Doc asked, "reckon yuh could hit that crow that's settin' in that pine up the road a-piece?"

Sam squinted, swore, took off his glasses and eyed the distant tree. Without a word, he got up, went into the cabin and returned with a long-barreled target rifle.

He slapped the gun to a shoulder, squeezed trigger. Black feathers flew, and the crow fluttered to the ground.

Doc grinned happily. "Any swappin' stuff yuh need?"

Sam guessed he could use a couple of harness tugs. Doc dug around until he found the tugs. In the meantime, he was doing some fast talking.

"Sam," he finished, "I reckon yuh can whistle?"

Sam let out with "Turkey in the Straw."

"That's fine," Doc said. "I ain't got time to swap yuh these harness tugs, so yuh just keep 'em."

Sam's eyes bugged. "Doc," he gasped, "yuh shore don't want things to misfire, do yuh?"

"No, siree!" Doc answered. "G'by, an' don't forget to put one bullet through his hat."

The second homestead which lay between Ed Lunt's and the Double-O belonged to Puz Piggley. Puz was a young fellow with yellow, uncombed hair and only one desire in life—to work every puzzle he came across. Seeing Doc, a quick grin spread over his homely sunburned face.

"Doc," he asked, "yuh wouldn't accidentally on purpose have any ole puzzles with yuh?"

"Why, mebbe," Doc returned. "I got a box of ole magazines. Most magazines has puzzles in 'em."

"Got a ole walkin' plow I ain't got no use for," Puz said.

Doc shook his head sadly. "Never do much plowin'. Might take it, though, if yuh'd steal a hoss for me. Ever hear of the Whistlin' Kid? Know young Charley Whitehoss?"

Puz nodded his yellow head. Pronto, Doc did some careful explaining, and as he talked, Puz' eyes lit up with excitement.

"Why, yuh bet, Doc," he agreed eagerly. "Let me have them magazines, an' I'll do like yuh say an' give yuh the plow to boot."

A few minutes later, Doc was on his way again with a fair walking plow piled in with his assortment of junk. Also, by now he reckoned he just about had things under control. No doubt about it, swapping sure put an edge on a man's mind, helped him work things out to a fine point. Why, it wouldn't surprise him much if he even figured a way to swap MacLoyd out of the spotted pony.

Arriving at the sprawling Double-O ranch house, he found that luck was with him. Not only was old man Tinker, owner of the ranch, at home, but he also had a visitor. Hep Harrison from the other side of Red Dog was there, making a deal for a string of horses. Doc hadn't seen either rancher for a long time.

As the three old friends shook hands warmly, Doc asked, "Hep, yuh still hire them Texans who drift through the country like yuh did in the good ole days?"

Hep grinned. "Just took on five new hands last week. They're young, full of ginger an' as tough as they come."

Doc turned to the owner of the Double-O. "Tinker, remember the good ole days when night riders used to rustle yore stock?"

Tinker shuddered and swore. "Doc, why don't yuh talk of somethin' pleasant? Them sidewinders blamed near busted me. But thanks to Sheriff MacLoyd, I—"

"MacLoyd's a changed man," Doc put in sadly. "Reckon yuh wouldn't know him these days. Lis'en."

When he had finished talking, both Hep Harrison and old Tinker were grinning in spite of their fear that MacLoyd was about washed-up.

"Sounds like it might be fun," Hep said.

"Sounds like a good way to repay a poor ole friend for the help he give me when I needed it," Tinker said.

"Good!" Doc smiled happily. "Reckon I'll be movin' along."

He winked broadly, and Tinker and Hep winked back. Doc was a mile from the ranch before it occurred to him that he'd failed to do any swapping.

"Oh, well," he sighed, "a man can't think of everything."

The sun was a ball of fire in the west when he pulled his team up under a sprawling cottonwood that reached halfway across the deep hole in Sugar Creek. Below the hole, the Dry Bluffs trail crossed the creek over a riffle of red gravel. This was Doc's favorite camping site. Sighing contentedly, he slid to the ground and unharnessed his bays. A little later, he had a fire going, and the savory odors of cooking food filled the still air. That

night he slept like a baby.

Early the next morning, he made a pack of the old horse blanket filled with grub and the old frying pan. This he lugged into a thick patch of timber and left in a tumbled-down log cabin. Returning to his wagon, he took his time about breaking camp. In fact, noon came, and he still hadn't packed up. He began to feel a tinge of worry. He stirred up a dinner big enough for two, ate his half and left the rest warming on the coals. Still nothing happened.

ABOUT ready to give up, he heard the splashing of a horse crossing the riffle. Looking up, he knew then that things were likely to work out satisfactorily, for he saw Sheriff MacLoyd, a scowl on his bony face, riding the spotted pony toward him. The sheriff had his shotgun poked into the old carbine boot slung from the scuffed saddle. Doc got busy, cleaning up the tin dishes.

MacLoyd bit off a huge chew of cutplug and cleared his throat. "Looks like yuh had some dinner left over."

Doc frowned. "Why ain't yuh back home, dreamin' about the good ole days, yuh blasted ole—"

"Ain't none of yore business," MacLoyd flared. "But it so happens that ole Bob Walker an' Jake Duskin have gone back to feudin'. Reckon it don't amount to shucks, though. Leastwise not like in the good ole days."

"I see yuh brought yore gun," Doc said pointedly.

"Brought it in case I saw a jackrabbit," MacLoyd growled.

Doc snickered and returned to his work. MacLoyd's thin nose twitched. "Things smell right good."

"If I got to feed yuh, I reckon I got to," Doc said unhappily. "Get off that no-good hoss."

MacLoyd needed no second invitation. He slid to the ground, dropped the reins and sat down close to the fire. Doc's eyes moved about, searching for swapping goods, and stopped on the sheriff's rusty spurs.

"Might do some swappin'," he murmured. "Dinner for—"

MacLoyd swore fiercely. "Doc, yuh're the stingiest ole maverick I ever seen! Can't even give a man a bite to eat without makin' a swap for it." Nevertheless, the sheriff took off his spurs and handed them to Doc.

"Eat yore fill," Doc said happily.

Gathering up a tin plate, knife and fork, MacLoyd squatted on a weathered stump. Just as he reached for food, a long-legged man burst into the clearing. He was Puz Piggley.

"Well," Doc snapped, "reckon yuh're hungry, too?"

Puz shook his yellow head. "Et before I left home."

He squatted down on his heels and rolled a cigarette.

"Hear there was a prison break at the state pen," he murmured. "Four, five desperadoes killed a guard an'—"

"Hope the Whistlin' Kid wasn't one of 'em," Doc said.

MacLoyd stopped a forkful of food in mid-air. There was a sudden worry in his pale eyes. "Who tol' yuh, Puz?"

"Feller from Red Dog," Puz answered.

MacLoyd reached for the battered coffee pot, lifted it with a nervous hand.

"The Whistlin' Kid'd have more sense than to come—"

A gun blasted, the tin pot jumped, and for a stunned moment, the bony sheriff stared wide-eyed at the coffee spurting from bullet holes. Suddenly from the distance, came the sound of whistling.

The sheriff's face turned gray. The coffee pot fell from his fingers, and he threw himself flat on the ground.

"The Whistlin' Kid!" he bleated.

There came another shot, and a bullet whined above his bony back. MacLoyd let out a squawk and threw himself over the edge of the creek bank. There followed a mighty splash. Puz Piggley let out an alarmed yip, leaped into the saddle on MacLoyd's spotted pony and rode away, crashing through the brush.

Doc eased himself carefully over the creek bank. He found MacLoyd crawling out of the water. From the distance, came the tune, "Turkey in the Straw," whistled expertly.

"That fool Puz Piggley went an' run off with yore gun," Doc muttered worriedly. "Now we're in a pickle."

MacLoyd wiped a trembling hand across his dripping face. His pale eyes were wide with fear.

"Just like ole times," Doc hissed. "The

singin' of bull—"

"Shut up!" MacLoyd winced. "Ain't yuh got sense enough to know the end's near?"

"The Kid may think yuh've got yore sixgun," Doc said, "an' not come any closer. Mebbe he's already gone. Why don't yuh put yore hat on a stick an' hold it up to see?"

MacLoyd tried the experiment. A bullet tugged at the hat, punching two neat holes through the crown. The sheriff sank weakly back on the muddy bank and began to shiver.

"That water was mighty cold," he apologized.

Smiling inwardly, Doc made himself comfortable. But not MacLoyd. He was wet and cold and scared.

After a time, the sheriff held his hat above the creek bank. This time, nothing happened.

"Doc," he whispered, "slip out there an' hook up yore bays. I'll hide under the cover of the wagon an' we'll head for Duskin's."

Pretending great caution, Doc moved into the open and hooked his bays to the wagon. MacLoyd, his face chalk white, ventured forth then, shinnied over the front wheel and concealed himself beneath the canvas cover.

Doc mounted the sagging spring seat and drove along the trail toward the Duskin place. Nothing happened. At least, nothing happened until they came within sight of Duskin's place. There plenty was happening.

The Duskin and Walker cabins stood on opposite banks of the creek. The windows bristled with gun barrels. Suddenly there came a barrage of shots.

"Drive up closer," MacLoyd said hoarsely.

Doc shook his head. "Wouldn't want my hosses hit. Reckon yuh'll have to go the rest of the way on foot."

MacLoyd hesitated, then slid to the ground. He took a dozen steps forward, stopped and bellowed, "Hold yore fire!"

Obligingly, the Duskins and the Walkers stopped shooting. Somewhat encouraged, MacLoyd walked toward the Duskin house, but he made the mistake of taking the shortest route, thus placing himself between the two houses. Just as

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he reached an open space near two trees, the feuders opened fire again. With a frightened yell, the sheriff dived between the two trees.

Bullets clipped leaves from the trees and dropped them on his bloodless face. There was no other shelter. MacLoyd was a prisoner in No Man's Land. Everytime he attempted to dodge out from between the trees, the Walkers and the Duskins increased their fire. At last, when darkness began to settle, the feuders quit shooting, and the sheriff came racing back to where Doc waited for him.

"Gotta get back to Dry Bluffs," he panted. "Gotta organize a posse to stop this fight. It's downright awful, Doc!"

"Just like the good ole days," Doc agreed, turning his bays back toward Dry Bluffs.

MacLoyd let that pass. "Drive fast, Doc!" he ordered.

Doc urged his bays into a trot. The darkness deepened. They came to the timber country, and MacLoyd shivered.

"In the ole days," he muttered, "the night riders used to hide in there. Shore glad them days is over an'—"

FIVE horsemen came galloping from among the trees, yelling and shooting as they came. They surrounded Doc's wagon, and the leader lit a pine torch. In its eerie glow, Doc reckoned he hadn't seen five tougher looking hombres in a long time.

"We've caught us a lawman!" the leader yelled.

"Hang him!" the riders bellowed.

They forced Doc and MacLoyd from the wagon and led them in among the trees to a clearing. Here they built up a roaring fire for light, and a lean, hard-faced gunman threw a rope over a high tree limb. MacLoyd tried to talk. His gray lips moved, but no sound came. As for Doc, he stood leaning against a lightning-split oak, happily watching the scene.

Just as the rope tightened about MacLoyd's scrawny neck, Rip Riley and his cowboys leaped into the light.

"I reckon these are the rustlers we been layin' for!" he roared, and cut loose with his sixgun.

As the battle raged, MacLoyd got the rope from his neck, dropped to the ground and began to crawl away. Doc followed him and managed to steer the sheriff to the south through the timber.

"Doc," MacLoyd bleated, "no tellin' who'll win out in that fight. If them rustlers do, we want to be a long ways from here. Any idea of where we're at now?"

Doc knew exactly where they were, but he said, "All I know is we're a-foot, an' I'm about tuckered out."

MacLoyd was about tuckered out, too. "I wisht I was back in Dry Bluffs," he mumbled.

Doc was still in the lead. It was no accident that they came to a tumbled-down log cabin in a small clearing.

"I'm stoppin' here," Doc declared. "You go on. Mebbe yuh can find yore way to Dry Bluffs an' bring help."

MacLoyd stared into the unknown darkness. The thought of going on alone made him shudder.

"Reckon I'll stick with yuh, Doc," he whispered. "Come mornin', we can likely locate where we're at."

They spent the rest of the night on the windward side of the cabin. Doc dozed off and on, getting some rest. MacLoyd stared into the darkness, jumping at every unexpected sound.

At the first streaks of dawn, Doc was up and exploring the cabin. Here he found an old horse blanket rolled around a battered frying pan and enough food for a fair breakfast. They built a fire in the open, cooked breakfast and began to eat. By then, MacLoyd was feeling some braver as the sun grew bright.

"Doc," he said, "I figure we're about a mile from that deep hole in Sugar Creek. That puts us about five miles from Dry Bluffs. I reckon we ain't got nothin' to worry about now."

Doc reckoned he was right. "Just like the ole days," he murmured, "cookin' out in the open."

MacLoyd cussed and choked on a bite of half-cooked bacon.

"Poorest breakfast I've had in twenty years," he sputtered.

Before Doc got around to replying, a man came crashing out of the timber into the clearing. He was Puney Porter, and he looked as if he'd been pulled through a knothole backwards.

"Injuns!" he panted. "They're on the warpath! Raided us last night! An' poor Loop—"

He put his hands over his face, and his shoulders shook.

MacLoyd's bony face lost all color. He tried to speak, but all that came out was a weak gurgle.

"What happened to Loop?" Doc asked.

"Scalped!" Puney wailed. "An' I reckon them Injuns is hot on my trail. Sheriff, yuh got to save me!"

MacLoyd looked wildly about and started to his feet. At that moment, something whizzed past his right ear. It was a feather-tipped arrow. It plowed into a tree nearby and hung quivering. MacLoyd sank weakly to the ground.

The Indians came from all sides, whooping madly. Brown, bare bodies, bright feathers flashing, faces disguised and hideous with war paint. One young buck was taller than the others. When he circled close to Doc, he winked slyly, and Doc winked back. Doc reckoned that if Charley Whitehorse's college mates could see him now, they wouldn't know him. As for MacLoyd, he was too scared to think of anything.

Brown hands grabbed Puney Porter and dragged him away among the trees. Puney howled. Suddenly his voice choked off in a death gurgle. Doc even found himself shuddering slightly at that sound. But MacLoyd was beyond the shuddering point.

The Indians blindfolded MacLoyd with a strip of beaver skin and loaded him on the unsaddled spotted pony. After they had led the pony away with his terrified burden, the tall young buck came back to where Doc still sat. He helped himself to some food and grinned hugely.

"How'd we do, Doc?" Charley asked.

"Best Injun raid I ever seen," Doc grinned back.

"Your team and wagon are in the trail just over the ridge," Charley said. "Guess I'll be going. Don't want to miss the fun."

After Charley had gone, Doc rolled up the old blanket around the frying pan and lugged it over the ridge to his wagon. Again he stopped at his favorite camping place, crawled into the shade and caught up on his sleep. Along toward the middle of the afternoon, he headed on back toward Dry Bluffs. It was about sundown when he met Charley riding MacLoyd's pony.

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"The sheriff should be somewhat rested by now," Charley grinned. "Anyway, we've had him tied to a tree most of the day. Even fixed a nice brush and grass bed for him to lie on. Of course, he thought we were preparing to burn him alive, so he's been sort of worried."

Tightening his fancy pearl-gray Stetson down to the tips of his pink ears, Doc slid to the ground.

"Yuh take my outfit on into town, Charley," he said. "I'll go rescue the sheriff."

"He's tied to that big pine on the bluff," Charley said.

Doc climbed the bluff, easing himself through the stunted timber and thick brush as quietly as possible. Peering from behind a clump of buck brush, he saw MacLoyd trussed hand and foot and lying on the grass bed beneath the pine. Doc waited until it was completely dark before crawling forward.

"Sheriff," he hissed, "yuh still alive?"

"Doc," MacLoyd bleated, "how'd yuh get away from them Injuns?"

"It's a long story," Doc whispered. "Hold still while I get yuh untied."

Doc freed MacLoyd quickly.

The sheriff sat up with a groan. "Doc," he said, "all the time I rid on that hoss, I was blindfolded. I ain't got no idea where we're at. Have you?"

"Yes," Doc answered. "This is the bluff on the west side of Dry Bluffs."

The sheriff sucked in a harsh breath. "Doc, do yuh reckon them Injuns is goin' to raid the town?"

"Look!" Doc hissed.

MacLoyd looked and saw the red glow of a huge fire reflected against the night sky. A great horror shook him.

"Doc," he gasped, "they're burnin' Dry Bluffs!"

"Just like ole times," Doc said weakly.

MacLoyd clutched Doc's fat arm. "Lis'en!"

From below the bluff came the sounds of screaming.

"Doc," MacLoyd shuddered, "that's the end of Dry Bluffs. Le's get outo here!"

"First le's take a look," Doc said.

CAUTIOUSLY he led the way out of the scrub timber. They came to the edge of the bluff and looked down at the town. The town wasn't on fire. The light came from a great brushfire. Townspeople, cowboys, nesters and Indians milled about. No one was being scalped. In fact, everyone seemed to be having a lot of fun and yelling their heads off to boot. There was the appetizing smell of barbecued meat in the air. Doc's covered wagon and MacLoyd's spotted pony stood in the circle of light.

Doc stood up, waved his arms and bellowed, "What's goin' on down there?"

The crowd became silent; then at a signal from Mayor Osgood, began to sing. The song began with "Happy birthday to MacLoyd."

The sheriff gulped and began to swear, but there was an unmistakable softness in his voice.

"Doc," he said, "looks to me like my ole friends has played a joke on me."

"It does look that way," Doc agreed. "There's Loop an' Puney an' neither one of 'em has been scalped. There's them mean lookin' night riders standin' peaceable about ole Hep Harrison."

"An'," MacLoyd added, "the Walkers an' the Duskins is all together. An' Rip Riley an' his boys. An' my pony an' yore wagon. Doc,"—MacLoyd's voice suddenly turned worried—"I don't exactly hanker for everybody to think I was scared. We'll let on like we knowed it was a joke all the time, that I pretended to be scared so's not to spoil their fun."

"I ain't one to deceive people," Doc said tartly. "How-some-ever," he added quickly as if he'd had a sudden thought, "mebbe if we was to work up a swap. Say that spotted pony for that steer I was tellin' yuh about this mornin."

"Doc," MacLoyd said hoarsely, "yuh're a dad-blased back-stabbin' ole skunk—but it's a deal."

After this, they went down the bluff to join in the party.

Once Mayor Osgood said, "Sheriff, I bet yuh was so scared yuh couldn't see straight these last two days?"

"Me scared?" MacLoyd snorted. "I just acted that way so's the boys would enjoy themselves. I was on to yore little game all the time. Ain't that so, Doc?"

"Why, yes," Doc said soberly. "MacLoyd's a hard man to fool. Why, we even talked swap while you folks was raisin' ail this rumpus down here. Pee-wee, yuh shore got a good do on that meat. Bring me another hunk."

The mayor looked somewhat crestfallen, but he was a good sport.

"Anyway," he said, "in behalf of all these people, I want to thank yuh, Sheriff, for furnishin' us this fine meat."

"Yuh're welcome," MacLoyd said modestly. And without thinking.

The next morning, Doc Swap and Pee-wee Miller were leaning against the pole corral, chuckling over the happenings of the past few days when MacLoyd came up, leading the spotted pony.

"What're yuh ole buzzards laughin' about?" he asked suspiciously.

"We was just talkin' about the good ole days," Doc answered blandly. "Remember the Whistlin' Kid? He was about as good a shot as Sure-shot Sam, The Rifle Wizard."

MacLoyd ran a bony finger in and out a bullet hole in his ten-gallon hat. His thin face colored slightly.

"Doc," he said with a strong show of dignity, "I didn't come here to chew the fat with two ole no-accounts. I come to leave this hoss an' take back yore steer. If yuh'll kindly trot out that steer, I'll—"

"Oh, the steer." Doc shook his head sadly. "Them people at yore party shore had healthy appetites. Ain't nothin' left of yore steer but the hide. Pee-wee, bring MacLoyd his hide."

"Yuh, yuh mean that was yore steer that Pee-wee barbecued?" the sheriff sputtered.

Pee-wee dumped the steer hide at MacLoyd's feet.

"That waren't Doc's steer I cooked," the runt grinned. "That was yore steer, Sheriff."

"It shore was," Doc said. "Yuh swapped me for it."

MacLoyd's face turned an angry red.

"Doc," he roared, "yuh can't pull anything like that on me! Feedin' my steer to all them—why, you—you—"

MacLoyd's voice sputtered to a stop. Up until now, he had been either too frightened, too excited, or too tired to do much thinking. But now, looking at Doc's grinning face, he began to realize the truth.

Doc Swap had put one over on him and swapped him out of the pony to boot. Suddenly this was something he didn't care to discuss or argue about. Besides,

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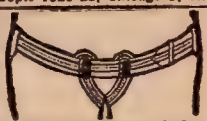

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most of those people at his birthday party were voters!

Cussing softly under his breath, he turned the pony loose in the corral, gathered up the steer hide and stalked away.

"He's the same rip-roarin', sod-pawin' ole cuss he was in the good ole days," Doc observed happily.

Pee-wee snorted in high disgust. He allowed that Doc must be loco, because all he could remember about the old days was a lot of hard work, dangers and hardships. All of which Pee-wee Miller figured he could get along without.

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 7)

To the right of the cattle rancher is a character that might be called Desert Rat. The sun and cactus tell that he roamed the wastelands. The pick and nuggets tell why. He came West as a health hunter. Cass hinted at that by showing his skeletonlike face, with the worried brow.

Bottom left is the Laughing Man. He plumb doted on a new story. The adjoining diagram gives an idea of the brand of humor that hit him hardest, Cass says.

Bottom middle shows Buttonlip, with the padlock on his mouth and the beard-draped jaw. He is a good listener but no talker. He liked his dealings to be short and to the point.

Last of our collection is the camera crank, the gent with the camera on a tripod. Cass used to bring him unusual snapshots and pleased him by asking him to take his, Cass', picture.

My Memory Notebook

There's the works, gals and galluses, twenty of the many memory pictures Cass Moore, the hide buyer, made. They got me so enthused that I started a memory notebook of my own. Besides drawings, with names and addresses underneath, I'm jotting down what I've learned about the unusual traits or accomplishments of each individual.

I give a page per person, adding to the notes as my facts increase. Ten years from now I figure I can walk up to family man Jones, ask about his five kids by name, inquire about the orchard he set out in back of the barn and congratulate him if he's still a member of the county school board.

It'll pay out in self-satisfaction, if nothing more. It pleases folks to be remembered. Also, remembering them helps them to remember you.

The Fair Name o' Texas

So much for all that. Let's turn to some stray talk about other subjects. To start with, let me rise to defend the fair name o' Texas. Awhile back, some empty-headed galoot told me that California had come to be the most important cotton-producing state. I passed along some of his brags in this Frontier Post get-together.

Now I find out that California stands fifth in cotton production. Before me are copper-riveted figures from the Department of Agriculture. Naturally, they show Texas leads. Mississippi, Arkansas and Alabama rank next, in the order named.

It's high time somebody beat the tom-tom for shy, shrinking, over-modest Texans. They ought to learn to step forth and assert themselves, not leave it all to me. Texas is also first in beef and petroleum production, in case you'd like to know, is near the top in citrus growing and can make other claims that I'll get around to mentioning some other time.

A Barrel a Minute

The last time I paseared through Death Valley, a few seasons back, there were barrels of water along the main-traveled road, hauled in regular for luckless pilgrims in need of it. Now, right along that stretch, at Stovepipe Wells, drillers brought in a well that flows at the rate of almost a barrel a minute! It was a big surprise to everybody in that dry region, where it almost never rains and many a pioneer perished of thirst.

Here's an item for our It-Ain't-So department. I reckon it springs from the fact that in the old days, freighters were the toughest, cussingest hombres on the frontier. The belief persists in the popular notion of the modern truck driver. The general opinion is that truckers are big and ornery.

The fact is, the diesel jockeys aren't any bigger or huskier than anybody else. As for disposition, they're a heap politer and more considerate than the average driver. Their main need for an iron constitution is to tolerate the bad-awful grub they're forced

[*Turn page*]

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to live on in the rathole eating joints along the highways.

Nevada Law

Nevada is one o' my favorite states, on account of the residents aren't so law-ridden as in other places. But even in Nevada, the law takes some crazier dips, twists and offshoots than an ore vein.

Gambling is a leading industry in Nevada, as most everybody knows, besides being a legalized pastime. Lately, in Reno, a housewife sued to recover half of the money her husband lost in a gambling casino. On the grounds that it was community property, half hers, and the gambler had no right to her portion.

According to this, the little woman would get half of what her old man loses on a Nevada gambling table. Also, by custom, half of the winnings that he packs home is also hers. That makes gambling a pretty safe risk for the little woman. No matter how the cards fall, she gets hers!

Deer Me!

Seems as though the ladies come out on top in deer-hunting, too, according to a yarn that comes out of eastern Oregon.

A lady hunter shot down a deer, tied her tag on its horns, then when she reached for her knife to slit its throat, the deer jumped up and ran off!

A man hunter saw and shot it. Both reached the deer at the same time, both claiming it. The lady hunter pointed to the tag on its horns, her name on it. The man scratched his head, pondered, then busted out as follows:

"Lady, if you can run fast enough to tag a deer without shooting it, then by golly this here buck is yours, all yours!"

A Ripe Old Age

The other day, as I crumpled up a last week's newspaper, a little ol' two-bit news item caught my eye. It was about an Indian in New Mexico who died at the age of 137!

I've asked a flock of folks since about details, but no results yet.

I crave to know more about that 137-year-old Indian. The fragmentary story said he had sprouted his third set of natural teeth, that records proved he had been born in

1811. I'm mighty curious to learn what he ate and drank, what brand of tobacco he smoked and what he worked at. Also, what were those records that proved his age?

Hardly one out of a hundred persons have family records reaching that far back. How come this New Mexico Indian could tally his age so easy, back when Madison was president? This oldster was a mature grown-up when Texas settlers fought Comanches and Kiowas. He was middle-aged when gold was discovered in California. He was in his 50's during the War Between the States.

Will somebody tell me why this old man had to die to attract public notice? He should have been a gold mine for historians, a find for doctors trying to make folks live longer and healthier, and certainly an entertaining hombre for anybody to talk to!

I crave to know more about that New Mexico Indian, because I figure to hang around another century or so on this planet, myownself. It looks as though I've plumb got to. I'll tell you why. I'm on the waiting list for a new automobile!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

THERE were, according to the poet, "Strange things done 'neath the midnight sun, by the men who moil for gold." Bob Service was talking about bullion—raw gold. But there were, and are, and probably always will be, wild, fantastic things done in the eternal scramble for minted gold, for money. And what were those Texas range critters of the old, bold days of the West but gold on the hoof? A fat steer was folding money—the long green, loping on legs, and bawling to be noticed by honest men and thieves alike.

One steer looked very like another—so much so that no man living could tell his own except by the brand—the mark which said to all and sundry, "Keep your loop on your saddle. This animal is mine!"

"Could be two opinions about that," said the longlooper, and got busy with running iron or cinch ring. And, when he got through, the steer wore another brand, and neither the rustler nor the steer were doing any talking as to how it got there.

Various dispositions were made of rustled

[*Turn page*]

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cattle. Jim Hatfield—the Lone Wolf Lawman—had seen just everything tried along that line. But when he hit that Brazos River setup he ran into a new one. Usually the big slaughterhouses bought their cattle for killing. But here was a gent—name of Christopher Corline and as prime a hyena as ever skulked the dim trails—who had his own organization, and a big one. Stolen cattle moved fast from ranch to slaughterhouse, and Corline was expanding fast. Gobbling the dressed meat business of all Texas.

Corline was physically little, but, brothers, his shadow lay long across that harassed land. He was a sinister power in Texas—and a mighty challenge to the best that Jim Hatfield had to give of courage and resourcefulness in fighting him. And of course it was of Hatfield that Captain William McDowell, chief of Texas Rangers at Austin, thought first when he got the SOS from down Brazos way. He yelled for Hatfield, and—to quote from next issue's novel:

The tall man who came quietly into the office in reply to his summons wore range clothing, dark trousers tucked into shiny spurred boots, a clean blue shirt and bandanna, curved Stetson with the chinstrap loose in its runners.

"Hatfield!"

"Yes, suh, Cap'n." The Ranger's voice was soft and his generous mouth relieved the otherwise austere lines of his face. His hair was a rich black, his eyes gray-green. Wide shoulders tapered to narrow hips and his legs were long and powerful. Heavy Colt revolvers rode in oiled holsters depending from his crossed belts. He was a bronzed, stunning young giant, in him the lithe power of a panther. His slender hands, hanging easily now, could in a pinch flash with blinding celerity to his guns. . . .

Yet often all this physical ability would have flung itself in vain against shrewd enemies had it not been for the alert, trained mind animating Hatfield. He could map out strategy and carry through with flawless tactics against what seemed overwhelming odds. McDowell had but a handful of agents to maintain the law in his extensive bailiwick. He could not afford to waste manpower and when he had an especially difficult job he sent Jim Hatfield.

He sent him this time, and Jackson Cole tells all about it in his great novel, KING OF THE BRAZOS, comin' up in the next issue of Texas Rangers. If you want a story that'll lift you right out of your high-heeled boots, this is it. Because the Ranger was in the middle of things clear to his Stetson rim, the minute he hit the Brazos. One of the first things he did was to make a quiet entry to Corline's main plant. And—

Out front was a separate shack marked 'Office. C. Corline and Co., Slaughterhouse Products." The door was open, and on the shady side stood a couple of saddled mustangs, their owners slouched on a bench. They were turned from the Ranger, and were taking it easy. They wore leather and Stetsons and were armed.

Hatfield went strolling about, his eyes missing nothing, and he came to a huge pile of fresh hides stacked against a wall. He seized one of them and straightened it out. And—a hole a foot in diameter gaped where the brand had been removed.

"Hey, you!"

Hatfield swung quickly to face the man who emerged from the butchery. He was so large he filled the doorway in his spattered leather apron and overalls. Muscles bulged on his brawny torso. His ill-shaped head had been shaved and the hair had come in as colorless stubble. Little black eyes were set close at either side of a hatchet nose and his massive jaw was thrust forward. His flesh had a grayish tinge. In one hand this ill-natured looking giant gripped a cleaver with a shining steel blade two feet in length.

This was Chopper George Kanowski. Nice fellow, huh? Well, Hatfield lulled his suspicions for the moment with easy words, but he was not through with George—no, indeed! Because—

Hatfield had noticed something during his first quick run, and, reaching the center where the smokepipes loomed, he entered. Sweating, half-naked stokers were feeding chunks of wood to the fires and the temperature was almost unbearable. Smoke escaping the draughts choked him and made his eyes smart.

A couple of barrows stood near a blaze. One was empty, the other nearly so. A worker was tossing handfuls of round hide chunks into the flames. Hatfield picked one up and on it was an X-7. The feel of it told him the skin had been freshly ripped off. Most of the telltale brands had been burned.

He was ready for a fuss, but the laborers did not try to interfere, only staring at him.

"Warm work, boys," he drawled.

They had a foreign look, and the nearest said gently, "No spik." He shook his head and went back to his task.

Kanowski had crossed the butchery and perhaps seen him go into the fireroom, for the big fellow came hurrying through the inner connecting doors. He rushed at Hatfield, swearing in fury, the cleaver rising, and this time Kanowski meant it.

"What did I tell yuh, yuh cussed snoop?" he bellowed.

That cleaver could slash a man in two. If thrown it could stun and cut, perhaps mortally. The Ranger was forced to make a lightning draw, the Colt hammer back under his thumb.

"Stand back! Drop it!" he began.

Either the Chopper's reactions were slow or he hoped to overrun his opponent. Hatfield was too skillful a judge of such situations to wait until too late. The Ranger had to shoot, and he lifted his thumb but aimed at the gleaming

[*Turn page*]

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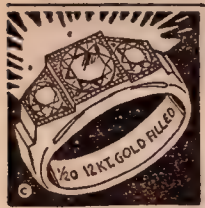

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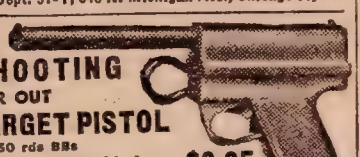

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cleaver rather than at the man. The revolver roared, there was an ear-ringing clang and Kanowski stopped short, hand stung and the cleaver falling to the ground. The lead bullet had smashed and bits had cut the Chopper. He began to sputter, but now the gun held him.

Well, folks, you'll get the general idea that Corline didn't confine his slaughtering to four-legged creatures. Marked for death, were human beings, people like Jim Hatfield and young Buck Robertson, and Buck's sister, Anita, who was one of the most beautiful girls the big Ranger had ever laid eyes on. These, and plenty of others, were menaced by the powerful and predatory Corline. But it's all in KING OF THE BRAZOS in the next issue of the magazine. A rousing, two-fisted novel!

What else? Plenty, pals. SHOWDOWN AT GREAT BEND, for one thing. A bang-up action novelet by Walt Morey, which begins like this:

Ben Blake, dropping out of the hills at sunset, found a poster tacked to a tree. He ripped it loose, stuffed it in his pocket and rode on. What did the poster say? He had a look at it when he had reached a spot he considered safe.

WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE—BEN BLAKE

About six feet, brown hair, black eyes, bullet scar on left forearm. This man is escaped lifer who was convicted of killing cattleman partner two years ago. He is believed headed for Great Bend, his home. He is dangerous and may be armed. If seen, notify Sheriff Hank Goss.

REWARD—$1000—REWARD

You can go on from there, readers—in the next issue. Other stories, too, of course, plus the features and departments. The next issue is a fine reading treat for everybody!

OUR MAIL BAG

We're mighty grateful for all the letters and cards from you folks out there. We're passin' on a few for you to read.

We do indeed read TEXAS RANGERS. We enjoy The Frontier Post so much, and a recent issue carried a most fascinating article about the Rogue River Valley area, in Oregon.—*The George Smiths, Denver, Colo.*

I read TEXAS RANGERS every issue, and I don't think there is a more level headed man, or one with more brains or better judgment than

Jim Hatfield. As far as women are concerned, let Jim decide that for himself.—*Jesse Fairchild, Huntington, West Virginia.*

I have just finished THE BLACK GOLD SECRET. It was very good. About Jim Hatfield getting married, I say *No.* Boy, I see red every time I think about it.—*Sherman Troyer, Berlin, Ohio.*

In your next swell story let the girl have black hair—please. You always make the girl have blond (golden) hair, etc. I am sure there were some blackhaired girls in the West. Keep Jim Hatfield a single man *always*—*Barbara Maro, Asbury Park. N. J.*

Having been a reader of TEXAS RANGERS since away back when Shep was a pup I can say I have never found any magazine that interested me so much. I have just finished reading THE BLACK GOLD SECRET and found it most interesting. That Hatfield is sure some fellow.—*C. A. Christopherson, Staples, Minn.*

I would like to tell you how much I like the Jim Hatfield stories. I get every one of them.—*Dorothy E. Martin, Maysville, Ky.*

I think Jim Hatfield should not fall in love or get married, but the stories are most interesting if there is a girl in each. My Dad enjoys TEXAS RANGERS also, particularly Doc Swap. I like the Hatfield stories best.—*Vernon R. Berg, Jr., Marshfield, Wisc.*

That's it for this time, folks. Keep the letters rolling in. We're always glad to hear from you, and each letter and card gets a careful reading. Just address The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. *Adios,* good luck and many thanks to all of you.

—THE EDITOR.

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TO YOUNG WORKING GIRLS — WHETHER IN LOVE OR NOT

When a young girl goes to work, she is apt to look on her job pretty much as a fill-in between maturity and marriage.

Whether in love or not, she's confident that a handsome breadwinner will come along . . . to provide her with a nice combination of bliss and security.

"So why," she may ask, "should I save money out of what I make?"

There are a number of reasons why—all good ones. For example:

(A) The right man might not happen along for some time.

(B) Having money of her own is a comfort to *any* woman, no matter how successfully she marries.

So we urge all working girls—if you're not buying U.S. Savings Bonds on a Payroll Plan, *get started now.*

It's an easy, painless, and automatic way to set aside money for the future. In ten years, you'll get back $4 for every $3 you put in.

Remember, girls—having money of your own may not make you *more* attractive, but it certainly won't make you *less!*

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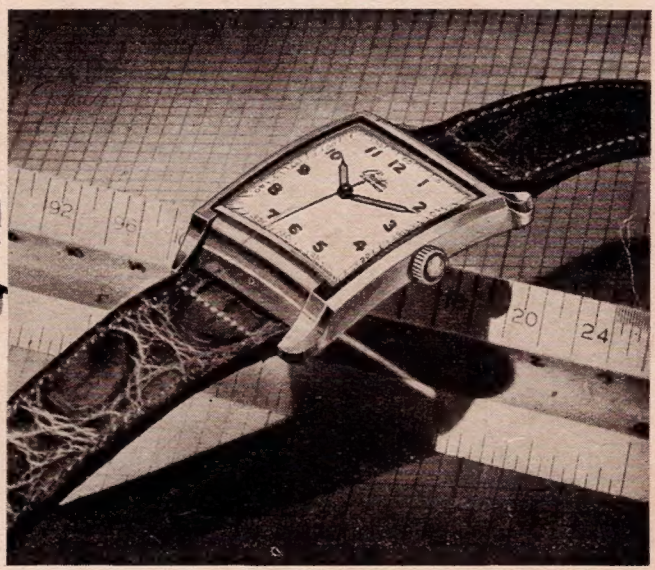

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How to surf cast at night

SAVE TIME, TROUBLE, TEMPER

According to Raymond Abbate, expert surf caster, of Deal, N. J.

IT'S NIGHT. You're all set to make your first cast . . . BUT you know that if your line or lure is fouled, you're going to take a big chance on losing your rig. That's where your flashlight comes in handy! Bring your casting rod to a near vertical position. Spot the tackle and rod with the beam from your flashlight. Make *sure* everything's right. Better have that flashlight powered with "Eveready" batteries. They *outlast all other brands.**

How to make night fishing easier!

FASTEN AN "EVEREADY" PEN-LIGHT into the top of your tackle box. When you want to handle tackle, just open the lid and switch on the light. See how much time and trouble it saves you!

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